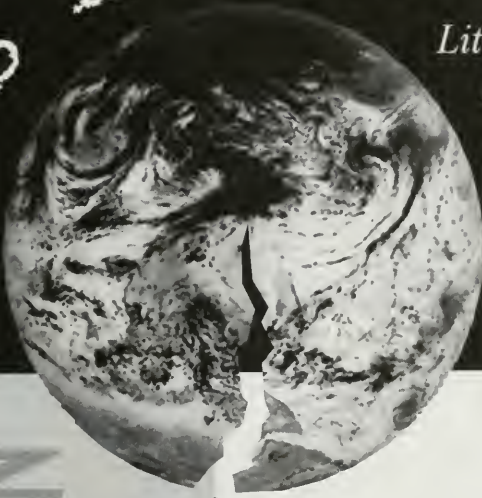


# RISK & RESOLUTION

*Literary Criticism at the  
End of the Millenium*



**Special Issue**  
**Paroles Gelées 14.2 1996**

*Selected Proceedings from UCLA's  
French Department Graduate Students'  
Interdisciplinary Conference*



# PAROLES GELEES

UCLA French Studies

Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouverait ici  
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

Special Issue  
Volume 14.2 ♡ 1996

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## Introduction

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1996 has been a productive year for the UCLA Department of French. The graduates students organized and held an interdisciplinary conference (April 19 to 21), *Risk and Resolution: Literary Criticism at the End of the Millennium*. This year also marks the first time *Paroles Gelées* will publish two volumes. Volume 14.1 reflects the strong intellectual tradition established by Kathryn Bailey in 1983 and built upon since then by a number of dedicated editors, editorial board members and authors. Volume 14.1 returns to the format of opening the issue with an interview with a well established scholar. This year, we are happy to have Michel Delon. Volume 14.2 will include selected proceedings from *Risk and Resolution*, due to its tremendous success.

The conference brought together a most diversified array of students pursuing degrees in French, English and Comparative Literature programs across the nation. The papers delivered at the conference were of outstanding quality, and we are pleased to publish a selection of them. The selection process was difficult, but unfortunately necessary due to limited funds. We have done our best to pick papers that best represent the quality and diversity of the conference.

We owe a debt of gratitude for the hard work and support of many people. First, we would like to thank Ross Chambers, the keynote speaker. He is a generous and caring man, whose touching paper on the witnessing of the AIDS epidemic triggered much interesting thought from both the respondents, Emily Apter and Vincent Pecora, as well as the audience. Through his keynote address and continued presence and support over the three days, he played a great role in making this conference the great success that it was.

We would also like to thank Eric Gans for his gracious introduction of Chambers and Emily Apter and Vincent Pecora for their insightful responses to Chambers' talk.

Thanks go to our sponsors for making the conference and the proceedings possible: the French Consulate in Los Angeles, the Borchard Foundation, the UCLA Department of French, the UCLA European Studies Program and, for the publication funds in particular, the UCLA Graduate Students' Association.

An additional thanks is due to the conference organizing committee and the graduate students in the Department of French at UCLA.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge Jean-Claude Carron for his continued support without whom the conference would not have been possible.

Perhaps this is the beginning of a new tradition.

Co-Editors

Anne-Lancaster Badders

Marianne Golding



## Friday April 19, 1996

### Introduction of Keynote Speaker

*Eric Gans, UCLA*

### Keynote Speaker

*Ross Chambers, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor*  
*"The Responsibility of Responsiveness: Criticism in an Age of Witness"*

### Respondents

*Emily Apter, UCLA*

*"Responsibility as Risk (Some Thoughts on Ross Chambers's 'The Responsibility of Responsiveness: Criticism in an Age of Witness'")*

*Vincent Pecora, UCLA*

*"On Responsibility, Cunning, and High Spirits: A Response to Ross Chambers"*

## Saturday April 20, 1996

### *The End? Reading Theory and the Theory of Reading*

Moderator: Markus Müller

1. "Reader's History Meets Textual Geography: Towards a Syncretistic Theory of Reading," *Arundhati Banerjee (Columbia University, Dept. of French)*
2. "'Romantic Effects': Henry James with Austin and Derrida," *Naomi Silver (UC Irvine, Dept. of Comparative Literature)*
3. "*Le Sacré* and the State of French Literary Criticism and Thought," *Alexander Riley (UC San Diego, Dept. of Sociology)*
4. "Obsolescence and Irreplaceability: Theories for the Disaffected," *Paul Casey (Bowling Green State University, Dept. of English)*

### *National Identity and Literature*

Moderator: Anne-Lancaster Badders

1. "Islam, History, and the Modern Nation: Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary Moroccan Francophone Literature," *Scott Homler (U. of Minnesota, Dept. of French)*
2. "Francophone Figuration: The Case of Léopold Senghor," *Charlie La Via (UC Santa Barbara, Dept. of French and Italian)*
3. "Whole Populations Conjured Out of the Ground: National Identity and the Development of World Literature in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848)," *Chris Andre (Duke University, Dept. of English)*

## ***The Language of Representation at the Fin-de-Millénaire***

Moderator: Kim Carter-Cram

1. "Genre-Crossing: Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and its Discursive Community," *Hsiu-chuan Lee* (University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, Program of Comparative Literature)
2. "Translation as Metaphor in Hildesheimer's *Marbot: Eine Biographie*," *Julia Abramson* (Princeton University, Dept. of Romance Languages and Literatures)
3. "Poetic Epistemologies: Gender, Language, and Knowing in the Work of Some Language-Oriented Women Poets," *Megan Simpson* (University of New Mexico, Dept. of English)

## ***Cultural Intertexts: Race, Gender, and the Post-Modern***

Moderators: Diane Duffrin, Lena Udall

1. "Multiracial Female Humanauts in the Twenty-First Century," *Lisbeth Gant Stevenson* (UCLA, Program of Comparative Literature)
2. "Beyond Parody and Pastiche: Charles Johnson's Reevaluation of the Post-Modern Condition," *Robert Bennett* (UC Santa Barbara, Dept. of English)
3. "Literary Criticism After the Revolution or How to Read a Polemical Literary Text," *Janet Sarbanes* (UCLA, Dept. of English)

**Sunday April 21, 1996**

## ***Beyond Literary Criticism: Movies, Masochism, and the Machine***

Moderator: Laura Leavitt

1. "Cross-Cultural 'Othering' Through Metamorphosis," *Kristy Wilson* (UC San Diego, Dept. of English)
2. "Jamming the Machine: Yves Klein's *Blue Monochrome* and the End of the Avant-Garde," *J. Stephen Murphy* (Emory University, Dept. of English)
3. "'But What About the Audience/What About Them?': Spectatorship and Cinematic Pleasure in Hal Hartley's *Simple Men*," *Tamara Harvey* (UC Irvine, Dept. of English)
4. "Anatomy of the Fin-de-Millénaire: Reading Bob Flanagan's Body," *Sam McBride* (De Vry Institute of Technology, Dept. of General Education)

## **Closing Statement**

*Jean-Claude Carron, UCLA*

## The Responsibility of Responsiveness: Criticism in an Age of Witness

---

Ross Chambers

I'm not a very millenarian kind of person and I don't come to you out of the East today with apocalyptic messages. (My East, after all, is only the Midwest.) I'll try to rise to the challenge of this conference somewhat, by reflecting aloud on the century that is about to end and about the historical role of us, literary and cultural critics, vis-à-vis the texts of this and previous centuries. What is criticism all about? Why has it grown in tandem with the culture of modernity that sprang from the Enlightenment and its attendant revolutions, industrial, political, economic and social? What does it mean to do criticism professionally, as a way of earning a living? I won't be answering any of these large questions, but I'd like them to lie at the horizon of the more specific topic I want to address. This is the problem of critical responsiveness, in particular to a history of pain, and of the responsibility of us professional critics in relation to that history.

When I stumbled onto the critical scene forty-odd years ago, and more particularly during the 1960s, a period of great theoretical excitement, it was common for people to say that, whereas the nineteenth century had invented history, the key discovery of the twentieth century was structure. It seemed so at the time and there is still a grain of truth in these characterizations, but I think they miss the mark (even within the natural limitations of such *obiter dicta*) by mistaking symptoms for their causes. I would want to say now that alienation was the nineteenth century's defining experience, and that the turn to history was a way of coming to grips with alienation by trying to understand how it came about. Similarly, I would account for the twentieth century's interest in structure (which was at its height in the dismal period before and after World War II) as evidence of a flight from the pain of history, as if structure offered a field of pure relationality that could be abstracted from the social interactions and historical processes over which human subjects appear increasingly to have lost control.

Consider just a few major events of our century: the two destructive world wars (and the many ferocious smaller ones), the

turmoil of two major revolutions, in Russia and China, and the disappointment of their failure—not forgetting a failed revolution, also, around 1968, in the West; the economic misery of the great depression; the horror of the Holocaust and countless other genocides and would-be genocides; the era of nuclear fear, intensified by the cold war, ushered in by Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the continuation of political oppression, ethnic hatred and economic exploitation in a world supposedly decolonized, and the vast displacements of people that have resulted; the globalization of capitalism and its return to ruthless laissez-faire doctrines in the absence of convincing socialist alternatives; the needless famines and the epidemics that might have been at least mitigated were it not for social prejudice and governmental cynicism. It is not a happy record and even allowing for a degree of historical foreshortening—after all, war and famine, misery, oppression and epidemic seem always to have been humanity's lot—our century seems exceptional in the degree of pain it has created and suffered on a world scale.

I think it has been exceptional, too, in the amount of witnessing literature this history of pain has given rise to. The practice of witness at times of dire extremity is as old as the book of *Exodus* and the genre is replete with plague narratives, accounts of slavery and condemnations of war. But consider the flood of poetry and novels unleashed by the experience of trench warfare in 1914-18 and the much greater flood of biographical and historical accounts, the music, poetry and films that have been devoted to the Holocaust; think, more recently, of the *testimonios* produced by the oppressed indigenous people of Central American countries, and, again, of the many narratives and diaries, the poems, videos, films, music and dance that bear witness to the AIDS epidemic in this country and world-wide. One reason why autobiography has become a major twentieth-century genre is that the ability of autobiographical writing to subserve a witnessing as well as a memorializing function has become evident: the trials of war, prison (and other modes of sequestration and confinement), torture and disease; the pain of gender inequality, racial and ethnic division; social and economic misery are susceptible to autobiographical treatment where more objective modes might prove less compelling.

In understanding this flood of witnessing writing, we must take account, therefore, not only of the agonies of twentieth-

century history but also of the increased access that ordinary folks have to education and to the means of dissemination represented by the publishing industry and the mass media. But I think something more profound and more disturbing underlies it, which is the fact that our era is the first—or at least the first in a very long time—to have seriously doubted the probability of humanity's having a future. The pain of the present is matched for us only by the fear that, through ecological mismanagement or nuclear disaster, we will bring destruction on ourselves. Witnessing literature, of course, does not guarantee that there will be a future, but it presupposes it: it is the expression of a desire for there to be a future. That is because the writing of witness has not completed its task unless it finds a readership: if living to tell the tale is essentially the desire that fuels the urge to bear witness, it is necessary also for the tale itself to survive if the survival of the individual witnessing subject is not to prove futile. Witnessing, then, presupposes a certain faith in the future and that is a reason why, alongside the pain of the present, it has seemed so necessary a gesture in the twentieth century.

But what, in all this effort to recognize pain, has been criticism's contribution? Feminist, postcolonial, ethnic and queer studies are certainly witness in themselves to various forms of pain and injustice. In the last ten or fifteen years, criticism has begun to take note, also, of various forms of testimonial literature: slave narratives, Holocaust witness, *testimonio*, the writing of AIDS. Two key theoretical works have appeared: Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (about torture) and, concerning the problematics of witness itself, Shoshana Felman's and Dori Laub's *Testimonial*. But the evidence of criticism's participation in the twentieth century's need to bear witness tends to stop there. I'm going to suggest that we *might* have understood criticism, more generally, as standing in relation to the texts of the past, whether specifically witnessing texts or no, in the way that a responsive reading stands in relation to witnessing texts, as a continuation of their project; whereas the practice that mainly defines us, the production of commentary or, if you will, "doing readings," has become, instead, a semi-autonomous professional activity. I mean that we treat the texts of our culture as being available for us to demonstrate—mainly for the benefit of other professional critics—our skill at making them signify in ways that bring credit to us, the interpreters, in proportion as the



interpretations prove to be—within the limits and conventions of pertinence that define the rules of critical play—unforeseen, unexpected and indeed unpredictable, that is, “original.”

This game of commentary is a lot of fun to play once you’ve gotten the hang of it, but it does tend to develop into a mandarin pursuit; that, I think, is because it’s posited on a principle that tends to substitute the performance of the *critical* project for the resonance that might be given, through amplification, to what I will call (recognizing in advance the difficulties of this concept) the *textual* project. For one thing about witnessing literature is that, in it, the textual project is difficult to ignore: it’s something that commands respect, the author having paid for the right to pursue it by undergoing deprivation, suffering, pain and even death. It seems churlish, for example, to do a “resisting reading” of a text of witness or to distance oneself in other ways from what one recognizes to be its *visée*, or “aim.” That is perhaps a reason why, proportionately to the significance of witnessing literature in our century, not to mention earlier centuries, professional criticism has tended to ignore, or to under-acknowledge, and even to marginalize, the literature of witness. It is an embarrassment to the critical project because it proposes a moral objection to what, as professional critics, we tend to do best (if only because it determines professional rewards). It makes visible a certain tension, within critical practice, between a requirement of responsiveness (in the case of witness, responsiveness to a text of pain) and a dynamic that I’m calling professional, that encourages critical discourse to develop its own autonomy.

Of course, the tension is inherent in the genre of commentary itself. On the one hand, commentary is nothing if not a relation to a prior text: it is a form of uptake that leans, therefore, for its authority, on a previous “take” of some kind. But on the other hand, commentary isn’t worthwhile unless it develops some point or *raison d’être* of its own, attracting attention in its own right. A commentary that merely reproduced or paraphrased a prior text without developing a significance undeveloped or underdeveloped in the text itself would generally be regarded as a waste of everyone’s time. But if commentary is untrue to its generic character when it leans too heavily on prior texts, it can equally betray its generic function by developing interests and concerns that are too remote. Consider sports commentary on TV: the show, in one

sense, is on the field of play—the rink, ground or court—and that should theoretically suffice; yet it requires commentary as a necessary supplement, without which the show isn't really complete. The commentary needs to be lively, diverting our attention at the same time as it directs it; just so long as it doesn't become self-sufficient (this rule being particularly true, oddly enough, of commentary that actually substitutes for an absent primary text, like radio commentary of sports or critical commentary on a text one hasn't read). No one, as far as I know, regards sports commentary as a mandarin practice that only other sports commentators are interested in; it is rather that sports commentary is a supplement that is a part of the game (and so players will sometimes do it themselves, by word or gesture), and I suspect that viewers watching a televised game without any form of commentary would feel frustrated, as if half the excitement was missing. Literary criticism, though, as we practice it, doesn't share the status of TV sports commentary: it isn't really a part of the game, but another game altogether, in which most people have little interest (except once in a while when our debates are misrepresented in the media and made to seem even more freakish than they actually are). It has formed projects that are too detached from the textual projects that it has the cultural function of supplementing. It has thus become a culturally marginal activity.

I'm sure you're already mentally shooting holes in my argument from sports commentary, so let me quickly drop it and describe where I want to go in what follows. I'm proposing that criticism's relative unresponsiveness to the literature of witness is a sign of a larger unresponsiveness to the texts of culture that it is our task to supplement through commentary, that is, of a relative indifference to textual projects as opposed to those of professionalized critical commentary. At the far horizon of that argument is the thought that such unresponsiveness functions—a bit like the turn to structuralism at mid-century—as a denial of pain, in the specific sense that the cultural texts that survive and require our attention do so as evidence of projects that have survived their author's death, and ought by rights, therefore, to attract the particular form of pained attention, on the part of those who survive that death, that is called mourning. I'll give the argument an autobiographical twist by describing, as a kind of allegory, how my own thinking about reading has begun to change

recently, as a result of my work with the literature of AIDS witness, and specifically with AIDS diaries—literature that poignantly literalizes the theoretical concept we casually refer to as “the death of the author.” And I’ll lean my account on the authority of a film that allegorizes reading as responsiveness by exploring the themes of witnessing and mourning, and the relation between them. Then I’ll be ready to return, very briefly, to the conundrum of professionalism as an example of a question that’s frequently posed these days: that of the degree to which the conditions of our employment as University intellectuals—and hence the institutional authority we enjoy (in particular through teaching)—actually inhibit the accomplishment of our work as we might like to conceive it.

Reading AIDS diaries, which are accounts of their authors’ dying, inspires thoughts (and emotions) about survivorhood and notably about the sense in which one is charged, as a reader, with the responsibility for the survival of a project of witnessing that has been interrupted—but also, arguably, defined—by an author’s death. As a result of that experience, I’ve come to think of readers as survivors and to think about the reading of the whole corpus of our cultural texts as a form of mourning. Our work as critics could also be considered part of the way our society deals with a problematics of continuity and discontinuity that arises in culture because it must deal with the fact of death.

I have always tended to be a happy reader and one of my friends takes pleasure (he knows it bugs me to be convicted of something uncool) in referring to me as “the last happy critic.” It is true that I was one of those children who were never happier than when they were absorbed in a book and oblivious to the world. As a critic, I was much influenced in the 1960s by those impenitent enjoyers of texts, the so-called “Geneva School” critics, and by the French *nouvelle critique*, itself strongly influenced by the “*rêverie matérielle*” so persuasively written about by Gaston Bachelard. You could say that I’ve been trying to wake up from a dream of my own ever since, although not a specifically “material” one, and to emerge from an enchanted circle: a circle of privacy, indulgence, comfort and illusion formed by the pool of light that falls from a lamp onto the solitary figure of a reader ensconced in an armchair with a good book.

I turned to narrative, mainly in the 1970s, because there was also something of a linguist and grammarian in me—a structural-



ist, then—and there was something compelling about the progress made by the structural narratology that emerged, mainly in France, in the 1960s. Within a few years, we found ourselves in possession of any number of useful grammars of narrative, the teaching of which led me, however, to conceive the project of a narrative pragmatics, as so to speak the “next stage” of research. Without much prior thought, I took the readability of literary narratives as a model for the problem of understanding narrative as a vehicle and a site of social interaction and understood interaction in terms of those three famous French modals, *pouvoir-vouloir-savoir* (power, desire and knowledge), that flourished in those poststructuralist days. The key to reading itself, which I understood (and still do) as a general model of discursive reception, lay for me in its power to split statement and utterance or, in Benveniste’s terms, *énoncé* and *énonciation*, and to produce a relation of difference, and (following Derrida, now) of deferral, between a grammatical subject of statement (the text as structure) and a subject of utterance open to interpretation within the context of an act of communication. Out of that framework, significantly reconceptualized in terms of the discursive production of subjectivity (as opposed to Benveniste’s still positivist understanding of linguistic subjects as semi-autonomous entities), came three books, representing twelve or fifteen years of work.

Whatever else you may say about those books, they don’t amount to a hill of beans when it comes to a pragmatics of narrative. There are many reasons for this failure; but most fundamentally, I think, no general theory of reading as a social interaction could emerge because I clung unconsciously to a privatized model of the magic circle, the pool of light enclosing an individual reader absorbed in a specific text. Simultaneously, as a “happy” reader, I understood the deferral entailed by reading as exclusively a matter of supplementation and hence of gain (a reader “enriched” by the encounter with a text, a text “enriched” by the encounter with a reader) without giving thought to the sense in which deferral also entails loss.

In that last respect, I fell in with the general thrust of academic theories of reading, which—perhaps a bit self-interestedly on the part of academic critics describing their own practice?—tend overwhelmingly to be theories of gain and are uninterested in reading as a social practice. Barthes is one of those theoreticians:

"the birth of the reader," as he puts it in the famous final sentence of an early essay, "must be at the cost of the death of the Author," implying by that a victory of writerliness over restrictive social ideologies. As far as I can recall I've never referred to that essay in my work, until now. It may perhaps have been something about that phrase "at the cost of," which jibes a bit with the triumphalism of the sentence. For although Barthes is working here (the fact is often forgotten) within a certain theory of *écriture* that has a long history in France, his phrase "the death of the author," particularly when the word is shorn of its capital A, can itself readily be taken as a metaphor for the textual split that occurs when reading makes of a text, not an inert, parsable structure, but an interpretable utterance or *énonciation*. Thus, it begins to suggest that reading is, in the end, not a matter solely of gain, that is not without cost.

For reading in this sense to occur, a discursive subject, whom we can call the author, must lose control of the text's meaning and in that sense "die," so that a readable subject of enunciation can emerge. However, as Benveniste noticed, just as there can be no *énoncé* that is not also an enunciation (and so subject to readerly interpretation), there can't be an enunciation either without an *énoncé*. Reading does not produce an enunciation in isolation but measures a difference between what the text "says" (its *énoncé*) and what it enunciatively "means." This *énoncé*, of course, has no objective status: it's a differential product of reading and not a statement of, say, the author's intended meaning; but my contention would be that the inseparability of the *énoncé* from the enunciation nevertheless stands as a marker for the *idea* of an authorial meaning that has been inevitably displaced by the (also inescapable) intervention of reading. It functions, therefore, as a "trace" of the authorial project and a kind of monument to the author's "death"—the loss of control over meaning—on which the very possibility of reading depends.

In this understanding of reading—which I would describe as a discursive understanding in that it concerns interactions marked by effects of power, desire and knowledge, that is of relation (and let me repeat that it is not Barthes's understanding)—an issue of responsibility therefore arises, one that Barthes—whose complacency over the author's death has been widely followed in critical theory—has no room for. It is an issue of theoretical responsibility: what responsibility, toward the author, is entailed on the part of a

reader whose reading displaces—however inevitably—an authorial sense? And further, what is the responsibility of the reader toward that lost authorial sense itself? This theoretical responsibility becomes painfully literalized when one reads texts of AIDS witness, such as diaries, that are autobiographical accounts of their author's dying. It becomes clear to their reader that (a) the reader would not be reading the text unless the author were dead, and (b) the existence of the text implies a project of witnessing on the author's part—the bearing of witness to his own dying and death—which can't be completed by the author and relies, for its survival, on readerly responsiveness to that project.

Let's assume that the project of witness can be encapsulated in the message "I am dead." This is the message that's intended to enable the text to survive and to be effective as an active social agent following its author's death. Yet it is a message that cannot *exist*, either as a literal statement or as a sincere utterance, even though the conjunction of such a literal statement and such a sincere utterance would (by my hypothesis) define the ideal act of witnessing. The author, while living, cannot make it; his message—which survives as the readable *énoncé* of AIDS diaries—is "I am dying" (not "I am dead"). The reader, in turn, who survives the author's demise, produces the text that also survives him, but not as saying "I am dead": to the reader, the text as *énonciation* now signifies " 'I' is dead" (where "I" refers to the subject of the *énoncé* "I am dying"). The one comes too early, the other too late, so that the survival of the author's project is "at the cost" of its resignification within the terms implied by the reader's survivorhood with respect to the author's death, that is, within a new discursive context. A message survives, but subject to an effect of deferral that prevents it from becoming "the" message that remains forever potential. Thus the reader can't avoid recognition of the fact that the author is dead (and that the very fact of reading sanctions the author's death), nor fail to understand that the readerly message differs, on the one hand from the textual *énoncé* ("I am dying"), but also, and on the other hand, from the impossible message ("I am dead") that the authorial act of witness, were it to be adequately completed by the reader, would require.

Reading thus becomes a site where both *loss* is registered (in the interpretation: " 'I' is dead") and readerly *inadequacy* is measured with respect to the demand made by the text (i.e. in the

difference between the impossible "I am dead" and the readerly interpretation "'I' is dead"). The sense of loss describes reading as being in deferred relation to the supposed authorial sense, while the sense of inadequacy implies further deferral since the potential textual message that might have been released by the author's death has not been realized and cannot be realized. The responsibility for realizing it can only be passed on, in a kind of relay of inadequacy, to other readings. What I'm saying, then, about reading and deferral, is a version of what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have described as the impossibility of witness as an act of referentiality and the consequent constitution of witnessing as the passing on of the responsibility of witness, such that the failure of "direct" witness entails an obligation to "bear" witness, to be its carrier. Witnessing thus becomes a shared, social responsibility not an individual act. But I've also described the situation of reading as an inescapably anxious one, the opposite of the complacent or happy reading whose alibi is the theory of gain. It is here, in the impossibility for the reader either of repairing the effects of the author's death or of fully realizing its consequences, that reading begins to resemble the situation of mourning, if mourning can be described as the impossibility of forgetting the dead (under pain of betraying them) combined with the impossibility of not forgetting them, that is, the impossibility of not betraying them, since the survivors live on and must, as the phrase goes, get on with the tasks of living.

We might say, furthermore, that if pain is the name of the impossible referential object of witnessing—what witnessing discourse cannot say—pain returns and is transmitted from writer to reader in the anxiety provoked by discursive inadequacy. The writer worries about the posthumous survival of a message that will fatally be committed to the inadequacy of some reader's survivorhood; the reader—conscious of the loss and inadequacy that mark readerly reception—becomes a site of anxiety and of mourning over the indelible mark of death that makes reading both, (1) a deferred act (intervening too late to catch the message the author is too early to pronounce) and so, (2) an act of deferral (passing on the responsibility) in its turn. No reading, however responsive it may seek to be, can ever be responsive *enough*. Yet no reader can fail to respond to a message that carries an authority, in Benjamin's famous phrase, "borrowed from death." The *responsi-*



*bility of responsiveness* (etymologically cognate words), which has to be assumed individually, can only be *realized* by the sharing of inadequacies; and it is finally that sharing among survivors, then, which in a society comes to constitute death's authority.

A short film by Canadian filmmaker Laurie Lynd, significantly entitled "RSVP," concerns the relation of both witnessing and mourning to the dynamics of discursive deferral and becomes readable, therefore, as an allegory of reading as mourning. I'll have to tell it in some detail for its force to become apparent. "RSVP" is set in Toronto. A youngish man, Sid, enters an empty house, evidently just home from a trip. He reads a message taped to a mirror, releases the cat into the garden. The phone rings but he doesn't answer it; we hear a jointly recorded message which enables us, although we may not realize this on the first viewing, to hear the voice—surviving through deferral—of a dead man, Sid's lover, Andy, from whose funeral in Winnipeg Sid is returning. As the friend who is calling now records his message (the third deferred message in the first moments of the film, after the note and Andy's voice on the answering machine), the support he offers makes us realize Sid's state of bereftness and a glimpse of a hospital bed set up by the French windows—an icon these days for AIDS—confirms the cause of Andy's death.

As Sid looks at two sets of family photos—his own with Andy; then, on the refrigerator, those of Andy's parents separately and (mediating them) of a young woman who will prove to be Andy's sister Ellen—he prepares to make tea and switches the radio on, just in time to catch a CBC request program, entitled "RSVP," in which an announcer is *responding*—by broadcasting it—to the request of one Andrew Sellman, who having been unable to attend a recital by Jessye Norman, has asked to hear the soprano's recording of Berlioz's "Le spectre de la rose," from *Les Nuits d'Été*. As the orchestral introduction sounds, Sid stands motionless, his face troubled, then hastens to record the music, fumbling with the equipment as he does so. Deferral upon deferral: Andy, one realizes, has made the request before his death, setting it up as a message from beyond the grave (as proof of his intention, we see later that the lovers own the same recording in their collection). The complicated mechanism of radio technology, along with the inbuilt delay of request and response, are being employed in the service of a certain project of self-survival on Andy's part, which

Sid, after the announcer, is now furthering by recording the message.

Deferral as a price of survival is also implied in multiple ways by the song itself: a poem by Gautier, set by Berlioz, recorded by Norman, broadcast by CBC in a chain of relays, its own theme is that of survival. With its last faint perfume, a wilted rose speaks to the (presumably beautiful young) woman who wore it to the ball, and was thus responsible for the rose's death; but it speaks lovingly of its contentment to find itself lying, as if entombed in alabaster, on its wearer's breast. Gautier is specifically ("Ci-gît une rose" ["Here lies a rose"]) referring his poem to the conventions of epitaph, whereby the "soul" of a deceased person speaks a message addressed to the living:

Ce léger parfum est mon âme,  
Et j'arrive du paradis.

This faint perfume is my soul,  
And I come to you from paradise.

But deferred, now, by the chain of relays, from its context of writing (in which it had the value, perhaps, of a piece of semi-bantering, over-precious, poetic wit), the poem of survival itself survives, albeit with a signification that, in the new context, is radically altered, since the rose's message in the *énoncé* has become, as enunciation, a message from Andy, and it speaks of AIDS (Gautier's ball becoming a reference to the good times associated with the urban gay lifestyle and the circumstances of the rose's death hinting, perhaps, at the possibility of Andy's having been contaminated by his lover). The authorial message (about roses and such) has "died" (although it persists from relay to relay as the poem's *énoncé*) in order for the poem to become readable as a text of AIDS witness. The uncanny quality that derives from the "spectral" character of a message that survives, although so marked by death that its authority is profoundly altered (no longer bantering and precious, but eerie and momentous), is of course reinforced by the music. Berlioz's orchestration is lush, luxurious and often voluptuous, but at times also hollow and mysterious, as if he were particularly sensitive to the connotations of death as the guest at life's feast that are in the poem. And the unearthly quality of Jessye Norman's operatically trained soprano voice, with its

hints of the sublimity of the "inhuman" and its own otherworldly quality, concretizes very powerfully the idea of a voice speaking "from paradise" with an authority derived from death.

As the music plays, the camera moves out from Sid's house to explore a community of friends (a lesbian and gay bookstore and counseling center with its bulletin board of obituaries to which Andy's is added), but also another environment, the high school where Andy taught and where the announcement of his death has been less lovingly vandalized by homophobic graffiti. Received as epitaph, the message is responded to and simultaneously retransmitted in the mode of obituary (a genre in which the dead person's already deferred voice is replaced by another, in the mode of "'I' is dead"). When the camera finally returns to its point of departure and we discover Sid pacing the hallway as the haunting last measures, with their hollow woodwind orchestration, resound in the empty house:

Ci-gît une rose,  
Que tous les rois vont jalouser,

Here lies a rose  
That every king will envy[.]

The context of the message from beyond has consequently widened: it is no longer just the house voided by AIDS but a larger social scene, one partly of warmth and companionship and partly of hostility and confrontation. Accordingly, the problem of family now enters the picture. Busying himself frantically with packing away Andy's things, Sid comes upon a sweater, draped over a chair at Andy's desk, as if he were still using it, and he falls into contemplation. Then he goes to the phone and calls Ellen, Andy's sister in Winnipeg.

If the relays figure "Le spectre de la rose" as signifying the authority messages acquire through (death and) deferral, Ellen—as a (presumed) lesbian who is also "in touch" with the family—is the film's principal figure of mediation, that is of relay, as a mode of continuity. Sid can't communicate directly with Andy's parents, but Ellen is able to transmit to them his message about Andy's message of request and response, which, living in Winnipeg, they will be able to hear because the broadcast, in yet another instance of deferral, is time-delayed. Her mother is responsive ("Of course

I want to hear it. Thank you for telling me.”); but it is also for her to retransmit Ellen’s message about Sid’s message about Andy’s message, this time to its final destination, Andy’s father, the very figure, one supposes, of patriarchal authority in its homophobic incarnation. She does so by turning on the radio as she serves him his lunch. At first scowling and isolated behind his newspaper, then troubled and moved, the father, as ultimate addressee of Andy’s request for a response, remains—by contrast in particular with Ellen, who poignantly breaks down and gives way to grief as she stands listening to the music in her own kitchen—not undisturbed, but apparently unresponsive.

His response, when it comes, is delayed by a week. The film now, as it closes, echoes its opening scenes. As we see Sid approaching and entering his house again, we hear the answering machine once more speaking in the emptiness. Now only Sid’s voice invites the caller to leave a message; again, the caller is not a friend but Andy’s father. “I just wanted to thank you for letting Ellen know about that song,” he records. “I’m sorry we didn’t get a chance to talk more at the funeral. We know what a big help you were to Andy. We know how important you were to him. Well, thanks.” These, under the circumstances, are broken, poverty-stricken words; and they are not received directly by Sid (let alone by Andy, for whom they come too late); they are spoken, so to speak, “under deferral” and, if they constitute an obituary of sorts, it is weighed toward the affairs of the living: the reconciliation of Andy’s father and Sid. This deferred response to a much-deferred message is clearly inadequate and yet it’s also something un hoped for, given the history of alienated affections at which the film allows us to guess. For, it is a response and the implication is that this degree of (inadequate) responsiveness would not have been achieved had not Andy’s message itself, by virtue of the authority it borrows from death (and deferral), had a particular power to elicit it. Nor would the message of Andy’s witness have been efficacious had it not been retransmitted through a chain of witnessing relays embodied (leaving Gautier, Berlioz, Norman and the CBC out of it, as the vehicles of the message) by Sid, as its first addressee, then by Ellen and her mother, so that it acquires a social impact on top of its personal value to Sid. Although the film achieves an effect of closure with the father’s reception and response to the message, it is also itself using the two interlocked



chains of relayed messages as the vehicle of its own witnessing, replicating Andy's message and rebroadcasting it, so to speak, to an audience that includes me, retransmitting it, inadequately, here.

But let's not forget the sweater which, it will be remembered, provoked Sid's decision to retransmit to the family Andy's message, received and understood in the first instance as addressed to him. It is like a text in abeyance, awaiting reading. As the father records his message of apology, acknowledgment and perhaps reconciliation, Sid again, as at the beginning, enters the house, but this time removes his jacket, encountering as he does so the sweater which now hangs on the coatrack, the relic of Andy that signifies both his absence and the sense in which he survives and remains present to the mourning Sid. At this point, the memory stirs in Sid that gives the sweater its symbolic charge for him, one of those flashes of reminiscence, seemingly random, that mourners know well and the film plays back the incident for us. Sid and Andy (whom now we *see* for the first and only time) are leaving the house together to attend a social engagement. To Sid's slight irritation, Andy stops and returns to the house; he has forgotten his sweater. Sid: "It's not cold." Andy: "It's always cold in their house." Sid: "We'll be late." Andy: "We're always late." Andy quickly grabs the sweater off the hook, gives Sid an affectionate and reconciliatory peck and they leave together.

We're invited to interpret the sense of this memory in the context of Sid's bereavement. As a figure of Andy's absent presence, what it means for the survivor, Sid, is a consciousness that, in the after-life of his survivorhood, it is nevertheless "always cold" and "always (too) late." Andy's sweater might keep Sid warm if he were able to break down the distance of his belatedness (the distance of death) and put it on. But we don't see him put it on: in the last shot of the film he stands, staring and contemplative, by the coatrack, able neither to assume the sweater—a relic of Andy's life—as his own, nor yet to ignore its presence in his own life. It is like the texts of our culture in which the spectral presence of an authorial project eerily survives: we, as their readers, can neither assume that project, which the author's death has indelibly interrupted, nor yet be completely unresponsive to its authority and the demand it makes of us to accord it a mode of survival through our reading. Our inadequate responses thus take the form of deferral,

as the passing on of the message, relay-fashion, and each time in a modified form. Each retransmitted message will be in some sense continuous with the message to which it responds but also, and inescapably, discontinuous with it. The film seems to assure us that this is what is meant by broadcasting, and that it is by virtue of such broadcasting through which messages are socially (not just privately) received and of the responsibility of responsiveness jointly shouldered, that texts whose authors are dead—ultimately, all texts—acquire an authority “borrowed from death” and are able to exert their effects.

Let me finish now with just two short comments. One is about responsiveness, the other about professionalism; and both entail a catch-22.

Frederic Jameson defines history concisely and memorably as “what hurts.” I have been proposing that a responsive criticism would participate, in the mode of mourning, in the ongoing process of witnessing that is a product of history so understood, a history of pain. I have also said that discursive response to discursive manifestations of pain is always and inevitably inadequately responsive, because it is subject to all the effects of deferral. It follows, and this is the catch-22—that the more responsive an act of critical reception tries to be, the more it is likely to be conscious of its own inadequacy, its failure to measure up to the required standards of responsiveness: the responsive critic, in other words, will demonstrate responsiveness by feeling guilty of unresponsiveness. Responsiveness, to put it another way, is like saintliness: each of these two requirements is so stringent that the saintly or the responsive person, in the end, is not the one who measures up to the requirement, but the one who is most conscious of falling short of the desired ideal. Conversely, it is those who most confidently and unselfconsciously believe themselves to be saintly or responsive who are open to indictment for complacency: their saintliness (responsiveness) is a sham, a matter of deceit or self-deceit. So I need now to restate my argument slightly and recommend not responsiveness as such—an impossible ideal—but reading that is anxious about the quality of its responsiveness to the extent that it is conscious that reading participates in a history of pain and has a responsibility of witness.

For University critics, one of the themes on which anxiety about responsiveness might focus—this is my second comment and I am returning to a point already foreshadowed at the beginning of this talk—is professionalism. In the United States, we have relatively few public intellectuals and fewer still who define their task as cultural (including literary) criticism; of these, most are on the right of the political spectrum and are unlikely to entertain an understanding of history as “what hurts” or to promote the literature of witness. That responsibility thus devolves on University critics, who are, however (to use the verb that’s in common use), “trained” in graduate schools to be critics and to consider their work, therefore, as a form of research, that is, a mode of disciplinary production of knowledge that is more “about” its object than it considers itself to participate in what it studies. That is, roughly speaking, what Foucault meant when he pointed out that the characteristic practice of disciplines is examination (not reading). So there is some tension between our research mission, as we conceive it, and our vocational responsibility as readers—one that might well be quite salutary, I think, as a tension. It’s when the weight of attention moves too far in the direction of research that I begin to worry. We who do research in the humanities can easily overestimate the degree to which it is taken seriously outside of our own relatively small group. You do not even have to set foot outside of the Universities to become aware of this, it is enough to sit with social scientists and natural scientists on University-wide committees. Our research is fun and it is interesting and important to us; I don’t believe it seriously justifies our existence in the eyes of the world, although we would have no institutional status at all, within Universities, if we did not do it, and take it seriously.

Yet, a society that is willing to expend money on maintaining a body of several thousand people whose task it is to frequent the texts of culture and confer on these some form of continued cultural agency is clearly entrusting some sort of responsibility to us. I’m suggesting that it is a responsibility other than the research we do. I would argue also that it is not exhausted by disabused analyses like Bourdieu’s (with which I concur), of education as the provision of symbolic capital to the children of a specific class. If there were no professional critics working in Universities, the maintenance of culture, in the sense of mediating the relation of continuity and discontinuity that constitutes the culture’s history

as a permanent encounter with the fact of death, would scarcely be done, at least to the extent that such work entails the reading of texts. Yet, because it *has* become a specialized pursuit subject to the demands of professionalism, there is some danger of our losing sight of the cultural work we are doing and forgetting why it needs to be done. That's the catch-22 of professionalism. Without it, the cultural work of mourning and witnessing might largely go undone in a society such as ours; under the conditions of professionalism, though, our attention gets rather easily diverted from doing that work.

So I've told a story, in part autobiographical, about our professional forgetting of some of the cost that's mentioned in Barthes's famous phrase about "the death of the A/author." It's an allegorical story and I've tried to suggest some of the ways the allegory might be read (I'm sure there are others) by indicating the lines of thought that have begun to impinge on my consciousness as a result of my encounter with AIDS diaries and other forms of AIDS witness, and have made me a more anxious reader than once I was (not anxious enough, of course—for anxiety too, like responsiveness, is a catch-22). I've told the story because I was curious to know what degree of responsiveness it might encounter—whether the allegory would be read and how it would be read—not only among my professional colleagues, but also and especially among those of you who are undergoing professionalization as critics right now and are perhaps likely to be particularly sensitive to the problems of which I've spoken.

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## Responsibility as Risk (Some Thoughts on Ross Chambers's "The Responsibility of Responsiveness: Criticism in an Age of Witness")

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Emily Apter

Ross Chambers's "The Responsibility of Responsiveness: Criticism in an Age of Witness," is one of those rare pieces of meta-reflection on the nature and purpose of critical work that prompts a hard look at what we are doing as so-called literary critics and why. Imbued with the guilt and sadness of a survivor in the age of AIDS, Ross's present sense of distance from his own career—a career structured around and motivated by diverse forms of textual pleasure-seeking—invites us to interrogate, in the deepest and most personal ways, the relationship between our *ontology* and our *calling*, between our modes of being in the world as teachers, activists, critics and readers of culture, and our status as professionals of a fairly elite order invested, quite literally, in a vocation. For the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, these "clivages du moi" or splits between intellectual passion and self-deceptive professional protocols, subtend and define the uniquely rifted academic universe.

Ross Chambers's paper reprises the kind of *nise en cause* of *homo academicus* that Bourdieu initiated in his book of that title in 1984.<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu's anthropology of academia's values and institutions relied on a demystificatory examination of academic power structures based on guild-loyalty, self-identification as a teaching corps whose body must resist and defend its stakes; certification rituals, structures of legitimation, strategies of self-authorization; and the emergence of symbolic (intellectual) capital which, in its volatility and quiescence, both mimics and holds shares in the global economic marketplace.

Ever suspicious of careerism for its own sake, of the smoke and mirrors posturing of superstars, or what Bourdieu has dubbed "consecrated heretics" (cultural sacred cows), Chambers reviews his own biography as *homo academicus* through an ethical and actuarial lens. His sense of the fragility of life, of generations vulnerable to lives and careers abridged by precocious mortality,

leads him to substitute the hubristic post-Structuralist Super-reader (a semiotic celebrity who came of age in the wake of the death of the Author), with the survivor and witness-bearer whose urgent task is to relay spectral messages and get on with the work of cultural transmission as a work of mourning.

Ross's evocation of responsibility and, particularly, the empathic link between responsibility and responsiveness, harks back to a Lévinasian notion of responsibility (developed in *Totalité et Infini*), that emphasizes the subject's innate ontological indebtedness and obligation to the Other. In the pedagogical context, Lévinas describes this responsibility as a "conversation" in which reason and receptivity are conflated:

Aborder Autrui dans le discours, c'est accueillir son expression où il déborde à tout instant l'idée qu'en emporterait une pensée. C'est donc *recevoir* d'Autrui au-delà de la capacité du Moi; ce qui signifie exactement: avoir l'idée de l'infini. Mais cela signifie aussi être enseigné. Le rapport avec Autrui ou le Discours, est un rapport non-allergique, un rapport éthique, mais ce discours accueilli est un enseignement. Mais l'enseignement ne revient pas à la maïeutique. Il vient de l'extérieur et m'apporte plus que je ne contiens. (43)

To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching. Teaching is not reducible to maieutics; [Socratic method, from the word midwifery] it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain.

In bringing survivor's guilt to bear on the "Conversation" between Self and Other, or between critic and reading public, Ross Chambers thus identifies a whole range of issues informing the project of a critical pedagogy. His example as teacher and writer encourages us to be wary of the extent to which historical symptoms, once bracketed by self-congratulatory methodologies, epistemic codifications, and genuflections toward interpretive rigor, risk losing their documentary intensity, force of revelation and personal value.



Ross's paper may be read as a *mea culpa* for reveling just a bit too much in that private pool of lamplight that sheltered good reading but which also provided a "fantastic" wedge against the life-threatening world that would not go away. The self-doubt that Ross gives voice to in assessing his own past engagement in structuralist narratology parallels many of the doubts my own generation experienced when deconstruction came to crisis.

Morally singed by the "de Man Affair," cut loose from the prise of a European theory that seemed to have lost its younger progenitors, galvanized by the political urgency of minority discourses, and nostalgic for the bygone status of the "public intellectual," a whole generation of deconstruction-trained critics looked to cathect elsewhere. The destabilizing reading practices that were part of a literary formation in the 1970s and 1980s were now applied to the "texts" of popular culture, historical narrative, gender identity, virtual reality, American and postcolonial politics and so on.

In the "early days" of cultural studies, deconstruction was seen as the bridge to a promising politics of identity; its ability to dislodge the dead fixity of eternal verities was treasured as a mode of semantic activism. The "difficulty" of deconstruction's rhetorical conceits pressured the mind to project itself to a "different" place. Through diacritical invention, language was defamiliarized. Neologisms and syntactic intercessions broke up patterns of impacted, predictable meaning. The separation of prefixes and suffixes from verbal *racines* released lost or forgotten significations into the imagination. And then there was the visual mobilization of the page through narrative spacing and whimsical deformations of orthography and diction. Perhaps the most "historic" case in which deconstruction's graphological "deviance" was "identified" as potentially worthwhile for a nascent identity politics, was Henry Louis Gates's famous move toward an "*écriture black*." Read today, Gates's essay on the Signifyin(g) Monkey (as trope for the historic black vernacular parodics of the master's discourse) appears surprisingly indebted to Derridian "*différance*," I say surprisingly, because today he would undoubtedly feel in no way compelled to address race matters via a deconstructive turn. "Perhaps," he wrote back in the mid-80s, "replacing with a visual sign the *g* erased in the black vernacular shall, like Derrida's neologism, serve both to avoid confusion and the reduction of

these two distinct sets of homonyms to a false identity and to stand as the sign of a (black) Signifyin(g) difference itself. The absent *g* is a figure of the Signifyin(g) black difference" (46).

In the decade that has elapsed since Gates's appropriation of *différance* or Gayatri Spivak's insistence on "deconstructing" historiography within subaltern studies, a well-acknowledged divide has opened up between minority discourses and continental philosophy. The breach became glaringly visible in 1986 in the controversy that erupted between Derrida (*Racism's Last Word* and *But, Beyond...*) and Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon (*No Names Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida's 'Le dernier mot du racisme'*) over the questionable political value of interrogating the word "apartheid" as a metonym for world racism, abstracted from the specific history of South Africa.<sup>2</sup> This early initiative to "identify deconstruction" (in the sense of consciously allying it with a global human rights movement) came from Derrida himself, but, one could say, in retrospect, that it backfired politically, and has continued to do so as the McClintock/Nixon position has fanned out into a larger critique of deconstruction's obsession with Eurocentric philosophical problems: being, subjectivity, representation and the real.

Where are we today? I would say that today we seem unintelligibly torn between literariness and cultural studies. On the one hand, there is a tendency, particularly strong in France, to promote an aesthetics of culture that goes back to the codes of the royal retinue; a culture of *galanterie*, *geste*, *raffinement*, and privileged intellection for its own sake. I am thinking, for example, of Marc Fumaroli's work, especially his long essay, "*Le génie de la langue française*."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, there has evolved a politics of culture committed to questioning the stakes of literary theories and institutions, to challenging intellectual pursuits that restrict their circuits of communication to the control room of the Ivory Tower.<sup>4</sup>

What I like about Ross Chambers's paper is that it refuses to offer a blueprint for choosing among fashions or "next wave" agendas. If his lecture prescribes anything specific, it is something inchoate and intuitive — it urges a moment of moral reflection on what we really are doing, it secretes a modest but urgent request to cock the ear to the "grain of the voice" (interior *and* exterior) as a prophylactic against becoming deaf to the speech of the parrot.

Ross's paper is also about living with risk and daring to take risks intellectually. His work provides a caveat against molding oneself as a professional before one has had the time or inclination to find out what one really wants to say or who one provisionally is in relation to the embattled realities of late modernity. Ross's paper is about the need to risk pursuing idiosyncratic interests and convictions; it argues, in short, for responsibility *as* risk.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo academicus* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> See Jacques Derrida, "Racism's Last Word" and "But, beyond... (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon)," trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985), 329-338 and 354-369 respectively. See also, Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon, "No Names Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida's 'Le dernier mot du racisme,'" *Race, Writing and Difference*, op. cit. 339-353.

<sup>3</sup> Fumaroli, Marc. "Le génie de la langue française," *Les Lieux de mémoire* III, ed. Pierre Nora. (Paris: Gallimard, 1992) 911-973.

<sup>4</sup> Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995) exemplifies the tendency in contemporary French studies to examine the hidden institutional stakes of schools of French thought. The most controversial interpretive thrust of the book concerns her reading of structuralism as a kind of excuse to forget history. The "messy" side of class struggle, urban apartheid, and the torture of Algerians, was, Ross implies, rendered semi-invisible by France's obsession with Americanization. This obsession manifested itself in the fetishization of gadgets, hygienic appliances, mass media, fast cars, and, in general, the designer visuality of modernity. For Ross, structuralism and Annales school history (*longue durée*) are guilty by association since, as positivist methodologies, they contributed to the ahistorical, technophilic postwar ethos.

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## On Responsibility, Cunning, and High Spirits: A Response to Ross Chambers

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Vincent P. Pecora

Ross Chambers's remarks leave us with much—almost too much—to think about as we contemplate, here at the end of a millennium, one of literary criticism's central topoi: "the function of criticism at the present time." Especially for anyone who has in fact lost a close friend or loved one to AIDS, and there are probably quite a few of us in this room today, it is an elegant and affecting and terribly sobering message about the ethical responsibility of critical discourse. It is, as well, a message with which I have had substantial agreement for most of my own scholarly career. So, at least in a general way, I feel like saying "Amen," or something like that.

But I do have problems with some of the argument and my position has not been made any easier by Prof. Chambers's devilishly clever claim that "it seems churlish, for example, to do a 'resisting reading' of a text of witness, or to distance oneself in other ways from what one recognizes to be its *visée*, or 'aim'" (5). Already, you see, my position has been compromised; for if I accept the argument that the responsible response to a text of witness is also a form, or continuation, of the act of witness, then Prof. Chambers's text is itself a text of witness—and it surely calls on me to respond in kind, suggesting that I would be "churlish" otherwise. I think that what has been invoked in this talk is a very old critical principle—decorum—and it is for me, up to a point, still compelling. I too find it difficult to see how—or why—one would want to read, say, eyewitness accounts of holocaust survivors in terms of the "logocentric" tendencies of their metaphors, or in terms of the meta-historical tropes determining their narratives. But I think one would find that, in fact, there are very few who have an appetite for this sort of thing. In a locally famous experiment involving human subjects a few years back on this campus, Saul Friedlander invited Hayden White to address just this sort of issue, that is, whether holocaust narratives could be treated as mere "tropological" systems; needless to say, White did not take the bait. I think we make distinctions based on decorum all the time,



routinely refusing to play academic games when they seem inappropriate. The truly impressive force of Prof. Chambers's argument is that it asks us to re-think the grounds of this decorum and thus to re-examine our reluctance to engage texts that threaten to deny us Roland Barthes's "pleasure of the text"—which is, *mutatis mutandis*, one of the main targets of Prof. Chambers's remarks.

Nevertheless, at the risk of sounding terribly "churlish," I am going to respond—as responsibly as I can—by issuing a call to criticism at the end of the millennium that is precisely the opposite of Prof. Chambers's message. I am going to suggest that it is criticism's job to be "churlish"—at times as "churlish" as possible. The hard part, the part that takes the most reflection, is finding out what is worth being churlish about, and to what degree. I think this is in a sense what Prof. Chambers has in mind when he refers, at the end of his paper, to the "salutary" tension between the demands of our profession and the demands of our "vocational responsibility as readers" (21). Perhaps it is simply that I find these competing demands more complicated—more imbricated—than he does; perhaps I am unwilling to forsake what I have come to accept as my own inborn churlishness. But part of the imbrication I am referring to is immediately given to us in the very genre of Prof. Chambers's address, for to an even greater degree than Matthew Arnold's or T.S. Eliot's well-known essays, Prof. Chambers's paper is already a professional discourse and it is, no less than theirs, also a deeply personal call for professional responsibility. I suppose I am less pessimistic about the tension between the personal and the professional—a theme that has indeed become something of the "hot" topic these days, in what amounts to a kind of commodification of confession—primarily because I have always believed (this is no doubt the Hegelian residue in my thinking) that without the approved forms and rituals and conventions of communication our personal utterances would be incomprehensible. Again, for me—and I think Prof. Chambers is in substantial agreement here—the real ethical (and political) demand is knowing how to use those conventions responsibly, neither fetishizing their determining role, nor pretending that some kind of "authentic" human communication—even of the witness variety—could occur without them.

Still, I am uncomfortable with moments in Prof. Chambers's essay where the critical submission to the "authority" of textual intentions and our role as conservators of authorial authority is

held up as the most ethical form of critical response—a form that is coterminous, he implies, with a properly ethical response to our culture's confrontation with pain and death. And I am uncomfortable with his formulation not only because, even today, this curatorial imperative is invoked by forces hostile to free and independent thought—the recent Smithsonian dismantling of a revisionist exhibit on Hiroshima, precisely because it seemed churlish to the memories of American servicemen who witnessed the death of so many of their comrades, is a good example. I am uncomfortable as well because, somewhere deep in my psyche, I truly believe that, in general, the most important and life-affirming kind of critical response in the long run is the response that pulls no punches, that pushes the boundaries of decorum in ethically responsible ways. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* is one of the oldest pieces of wisdom in the Western world, and one worth remembering; but to respond critically on the basis of such wisdom would, of course, be to abolish ethical thinking altogether.

Even Walter Benjamin, whose wonderful commentary on the “authority” bestowed on the storyteller by the proximity of death Prof. Chambers appropriately cites in his discussion of the texts of AIDS witness, even Benjamin also expected that this “authority” yielded more than mourning in the chain of subsequent stories that would follow. That is, Benjamin expected the story to produce good counsel, the wisdom that comes from experience [*Erfahrung*], and this counsel consisted, precisely, in the churlish—and profoundly life-affirming—destruction of myths:

The wisest thing—so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day—is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning [*List*] and with high spirits. (This is how the fairy tale polarizes *Mut*, courage, dividing it dialectically into *Untermut*, that is, cunning, and *Übermut*, high spirits). (*Illuminations*, 102)

Now, it turns out that in German, *Übermut* also means “insolence.” So, for me, the authority of Benjamin's storyteller may be derived from death, but it in fact yields a form of wisdom, and that wisdom, in the good Anglo-Saxon we are using today, recommends the insolence and the cunning of the peasant—the churl. If Benjamin is right about the most important ethical consequence of the storyteller's authority—and I think he is—then churlishness,

intractability in the face of the power of myth, may be criticism's most enduring and significant attribute.

I want to conclude my response by offering, in cunning and high spirits and, I hope, still responsibly, a possible counter-example of AIDS witness literature, one that is profoundly churlish, that is, one that meets the power of myth in our society with great cunning and high spirits, one that, with profound irreverence and *insouciance*, actually allows the now gloriously embodied *Angelus Novus* of Benjamin's theses on history to come crashing out of the ceiling above a man dying of AIDS. I am speaking about Tony Kushner's frankly millennial *Angels in America*. To be sure, Kushner's play is an act of mourning—or rather, it contains, objectifies, distances, but also elaborates and enlarges upon mourning, for example, in a powerful scene where Kaddish is recited over the body of the dead. But it is also—and you must forgive my reversion here to critical cliché, for I honestly do not have any other words to describe my own personal experience of this play—a remarkably cunning confrontation with American myth through the transfiguration of a dying man's delirium into an infinitely precious, fragile, and (at least for me) never-to-be-forgotten vision, one that would be simply impossible without the distance, and the *Übermut*, of Kushner's technique.

At this point I should perhaps return to my earlier remark about the inevitable imbrication of personal and professional demands, and hence to the central theme of Prof. Chambers's paper. Indeed, I found myself unable to go on after writing that last sentence—because, as it turns out, I was urged to see *Angels in America* by a dear friend, already sick with AIDS, who wanted as many of his friends to see this play as possible, who wanted, though I only dimly understood it then, witnesses who would remember him through it after his death. I spent many evenings on the telephone with him talking about the play, about its technique as well as its content, about its insolent allusiveness as well as about its ethical import. Over and over again, he urged me, as a professional critic, to write a commentary about the play; I promised I would try, but over and over again, amid the demands of my own projects and, perhaps, out of fear of what actually confronting the play in a critical fashion might demand of me, I put off the task of writing about *Angels in America*. And now, in what I thought would be simply one more professional response among many



others, I find that I actually have written about it, and that my own personal mourning for a lost friend, still unfinished, has been somehow powerfully re-awakened by an institutional duty. And for this, I would like to thank Ross Chambers.

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# Reader's History Meets Textual Geography: Towards a Syncretistic Theory of Reading

*Arundhati Banerjee*

In the last few decades of the twentieth century, literary theory has undergone a marvelous revolution. It has generated a discourse of contextualization, thus opening up boundaries between disciplines, yoking together questions of history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and opening up new disciplines as cultural criticism and cultural studies. In the process, mainstream theory has made a shift from questions of aesthetics and textual monumentality to questions of how, why and wherefore one interrogates a text, and the results such queries bring forth. Most of these schools have taken as their driving principle the question of the reading subject's identity in order to interrogate a text. While this shift is one that has added complexity, imagination and rigor to the ways theorists suggest that we interpret texts, it has also created a sharp divide with the more conservative schools that claim that the text in this discourse becomes merely a pretext for an interrogation that spans extra-literary domains more often than literary ones. Moreover, there is a growing feeling that post-modern criticism has exhausted its fundamental theoretical paradigms and is now doing nothing much more than testing more texts against these already established frameworks.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss one way out of this impasse; a possibility of formulating a discourse where one can provide for what identity-based criticism has failed to do: provide a space where one could bring the focus back onto textual architecture in order to reconstruct a paradigm of reading where the essential question would still remain why and how a reader interprets a text the way she does. However this paradigm would ask if there is anything in the *text* that makes a reader read the way she does, while acknowledging the identity-determined expectations of the reader.

Posing the above question would generate a reading model that is symbiotic, where one would provide a language for the process by which a text and a reader collude with each other in order to produce the meaning of the text. Put more simply, this

would do what postmodern identity-criticism has neglected to do: bring into focus the reading subject's presuppositions and expectations (partially determined by her identity), along with the text's semiotic architecture. To illustrate and concretize my suggested model, I shall use a close textual analysis of a poem by Mallarmé and delineate and explain the workings of the model.

Over the last few decades literary theory has evolved in response to two related but clearly distinct lines of questioning. While the ultimate goal of both is to describe the process of hermeneusis, they approach it from two different directions. The first, born out of a linguistic and semiotic tradition, focuses on the process by which a text engages a reader, posing questions mainly about the production and architecture of the literary text. The second, descended broadly from a more "humanistic" tradition, concerns itself primarily with how a reader interrogates a text. It describes the process by which the reader may contextualize, deconstruct or otherwise interrogate and analyze a text, as she chooses, in order to arrive at its meaning. The two branches of inquiry and research have evolved, in their turn, into several subsets of theoretical discourse which have subsequently maintained their independence by being orthogonal and sometimes even directly contradictory to each other. Nevertheless, these two strands are bound by two facts: they both focus on the final hermeneutic act, how a reader arrives at the significance of the text, and they both underemphasize one essential part of hermeneusis. This essential part is the first complex step of hermeneusis, which includes locating a text as being part of some textual system, and mapping it semantically into a schema; it is only then that the reader can proceed to interrogate the text as she chooses and enter the actual process of interpretation.

My model focuses on the mechanism of these two acts of locating and mapping. Locating is a synecdochic recognition of a text, for it recognizes a text as a part of any textual system. It can, of course, be at various levels: the reader may recognize a text as belonging to a certain genre, or using a certain topos, or sociolect or code or even all of these at once. It is crucial to understand this step of locating, for it is this act that generates certain expectations in the reader of the text, who now attempts, guided by the signs that the text offers, to map the text. Mapping involves organizing

and schematizing the words into an ordered system in her mind before she can go on to analyze the text.<sup>1</sup>

The three sub-processes of locating, mapping and understanding are however not necessarily in this chronological order. In fact they often are, with the exception of particularly hermetic texts, simultaneous. For a reader who is used to reading such texts, the first two processes transpire as naturally and automatically as a reflex action operating through a collaboration between the reader and the text: while extra textual factors like the reader's cultural background, gender and politics, among others, predetermine how a reader will approach a text; the text, for its part, provides her with a set of recognizable signs to facilitate her process of locating and mapping it.

The model offered here examines the dynamic between the text and the reader, not with the intent of studying the affect of the reader but to describe and emphasize a tacit pact between the reader and the text that results in what I call a symbiotic reading process.

My argument follows from two basic assumptions: first, that the model reader has read other texts and is competent to recognize recurring patterns, and secondly, that there will always be, in any given text, a sequence of what I call literary clichés, one of the crucial components of this model. It is the first index that a reader recognizes in order to her bearings about the text, locate it and map it into a particular schema so that a text is ready as a locus and object of interpretation. What I call literary clichés are determined by literary convention and they form oft-recurring and recognizable textual patterns. Clichés cover a large range of signs and may be found at various levels: for instance, it may be a particular topos that may be familiar to the reader (as, for example, "*carpe diem*"), a particular image (for example, the convention of the dying sun in an elegy) or even as specific as a particular syntagm that has become canonized (for example, "*ailles protectrices*"). They are the "recognizables" in a text awaiting readerly recognition.

The recognition takes place by directing the reader to the textual system it comes from. Once it is recognized, the cliché triggers an expectation in the reader. For example, the cliché of comparing the cheeks of a young woman to the petals of a fresh blooming rose is a convention from a particular descriptive system of love poetry; and a reference to it becomes a sign, or more



specifically an index of the genre. The reader, upon reading this sign may reasonably expect the text to follow with the other codes of this particular genre. A text in verse that begins with a description of an idyllic day in the countryside signals to the reader that it is reasonable for her to expect the bucolic poetry genre to follow. A literary cliché may be an index of several textual systems: it may signal to the reader by its conventional association, the text's genre, theme or style, or sometimes even all of these at once.

A recognition of a cliché generates in the reader an expectation of the text vis-à-vis the textual system she has recognized, and from then on she looks for other signifiers to confirm the expectation. While the text with its recognizable literary clichés trains the reader to understand the topography of the text, the reader looks actively for other signifiers to support or deny her specific expectation of the text. This begins a process of mapping the text into a schema according to the recognized syntagms and the priority that a reader assigns to them in the architecture of the text. As a result of this dynamic between the recognizable and the recognized, the text is transformed into a terrain of several clichés, representing their respective textual systems, which the reader interrupts and intersects, separating syntagms to distinguish them and finally binding them together in terms of confirmation or opposition to each other.

The act of mapping is, in this way, part of a symbiotic reading process which encompasses several phenomena. Recognizing or locating a text sets into motion the process of expectation and discovery by which a reader recognizes a literary cliché, which generates an expectation in her, directing her to look for and discover other clichés from the same textual system. This active readerly strategy of pursuing literary clichés to recognize and categorize them produces a decomposition of reading, and, in effect, a segmentation of the text. The reader starts her central hermeneutic act on this segmented, fissured and dispersed textual terrain. She now starts a process of "assemblage," making connections or binding syntagms, conferring an order upon the text; and in the process, the text acquires a fluidity of form, undergoing several transformations as the reader shapes and reshapes it, as she progresses through her act of mapping in order to discern its significance. Once the reader has thus sketched out the semiotic geography of the text, she is ready to interpret.

*"Le Phénomène Futur"*

Mallarmé's "*Le Phénomène Futur*" bears a potent title. The word "phénomène"<sup>2</sup> signals to the reader that the text shall deal with a theme of a philosophical nature. The reference to Hegel anticipates a problem of cosmic proportions and this anticipation may even be fortified by the reader's possible recognition of the notion of the Kantian noumena behind this word. As Ursula Franklin has pointed out,<sup>3</sup> the phenomenon's antonym suggests both itself and the tension between the Kantian Ideal-Idea on the one hand and its realization on the other:

For the future phenomenon unveiled in the anecdote will be the Incarnation of Ideal Beauty, its noumenal essence made flesh as it were, created by the supreme science of the Montreur. (19)

However, the reader's understanding of the full import of the Kantian or Hegelian reference is somewhat immaterial here. This is not to trivialize the actual import of such a reference in the text. Here, my interest is to see what is the relevance of recognizing the reference insofar as the reader's first exposure to the text is concerned: at this point, the simple recognition of these references will suffice. Even a reader whose familiarity with Kant or Hegel may be quite superficial now expects the text to deal with some cosmic or philosophical these and the first few lines of the text meet this expectation.

The text begins with a series of images actualizing the theme of decadence that is a popular theme with the Symbolist poets. This theme starts as early as in the works of pre-Symbolist Baudelaire and is followed through by Verlaine, Rimbaud and Mallarmé and their Symbolist successors. Whatever the reason may have been for the popularity of this notion<sup>4</sup> in the middle and the late nineteenth century, Des Esseintes, the decadent heir par excellence in Huysmans' *A Rebours*, by the end of the nineteenth century, is established as as much of a charismatic protagonist as Werther. The apocalyptic idea of the world coming to an end, the sense of weariness of the soul, the feeling that one has already seen, learned and done everything, is one that runs consistently through the literature of the time and forms its own system of representation: "Je suis L'Empire à la fin de la decadence," (1) exclaims the speaker in Verlaine's "*Langueur*" in "*Jadis et Naguère*," and says with infinite weariness, "Ah! Tout est bu, tout est mangé! Plus rien à

dire!" (11) This is, in sum, the poetic mood prevalent at the time Mallarmé's prose-poem is written.

The reader, having picked out the seme of decadence, proceeds to recognize it as being actualized further through images of aging and sickness. This again has its precedents in Huysmans' text *A Rebours*, where Des Esseintes' obsessive pursuit of the ideology of decadence is matched with physical ill-health, and the text follows this steady process of deterioration till Des Esseintes reaches his ultimate crisis. In "Le Phénomène Futur," this motif of sickness is encapsulated in the word "décrépitude," appearing in the very first line, pointing at once to the theme of decadence that the text is going to build around. "Décrépitude" not only means aging or ill-health, it is an extreme: it is "le dernier terme de la vieillesse." This is compatible with the notion and expectation of grave crisis that the text sets up from the very first lines and this decrepitude is, as the reader shall ultimately discover, not simply physical but moral as well, and it rings of an impending apocalypse. This expectation is fortified if the reader remembers that the literal meaning of "phénomène" is something "qui se présente," "qui apparaît."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, even independently of the "futur" in the title, the "phénomène" promises the appearance of something or somebody of importance.

The first eight lines in the poem set up for the reader the principal theme of the poem through a series of existing poetic conventions: the "ciel pâle" (1), the "pourpre usée des couchants" (3), the "arbres" that "s'ennuient" (5) and "leur feuillage blanchi" (5) are all images conventionally representing decadence and the reader may find examples of this in Mallarmé, Baudelaire and Verlaine. In "Hérodias," for example, (which is another text celebrating the cosmic drama), the autumnal season and the purple skies (though pertaining to a sunrise rather than to a sunset) evoke crime and blood and death:

Crime! Bucher! aurore ancienne! supplice!

Pourpre d'un ciel! Étang de la pourpre complice! (OC 41)

The reader is also familiar with the comparison between the end of the day and the end of the world from representations of autumnal sunsets used to describe a weary state of the soul. The seme of colorlessness, emphasized in the first few lines, "le ciel pâle" "La pourpre usée" and the "feuillage blanchi," reinforces the

seme of fading or aging; it uses the standard literary cliché of all-devouring time in "feuillage blanchi (de la poussière du temps plutôt que celle des chemins)" (5-6). The possibility that the pale sky "va peut-être partir avec les nuages" is ominous in its unnaturalness and hints at an impending cosmic crisis. All these images set up a background of a slowly decaying order, where, the title has promised the reader, someone will appear, or something shall happen.

Having generated and met a readerly expectation of a theme of an apocalypse, the text undercuts the previous effect of the word "phénomène" by offering another more simple meaning of the word: that of a freak. This is done in line 7, through the reference to the "maison en toile." This meaning of "phénomène" refers to another code, that of the circus, (where under the seedy roofs of make-shift tents, people come to witness shows of "faits naturels qui frappent la vue et l'imagination").<sup>6</sup> These "Phénomènes" may be obese women, deformed or abnormal children and they are all common sights at a fair, drawing large crowds to watch the "phénomène vivant." Now an analeptic look at the title tells the reader how at the very beginning two distinct codes are set up that the text is going to maintain independently, the code of the cosmic/apocalyptic and that of the circus. The opposition between these two central codes within one word makes the title more significant and the actualization of these codes through the poem shall constantly parody each other and the give the text its formal unity.

The reader binds "maison en toile" and "Montreur de choses Passées" in line 7 with the code of the circus first introduced by the title in the word "phénomène" and this provides the narrative space for the text to unfold. The setting with its fairground and showman is familiar to the reader from "Le Pître Chatié," "La Déclaration Foraine" and "Réminiscence." The time picked is conventionally poetic; it is the hour when "les douleurs des malades s'aigrissent (Baudelaire, "Le Crépuscule du Soir," *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 31)<sup>7</sup> and it is also the hour "qui excite les fous."<sup>8</sup>

"Immortelle" (9) refers to timelessness, and in the context of this ongoing process of decay and decrepitude and (op)positioning immortality and malady together, it evokes the sense of inevitability. The notion of sin and the accumulating sin of centuries finds its roots in the Schopenhauerian idea of the "péchés des siècles" (10)



and this notion also happens to be the dominant literary mood of the time, as the reader may think of Musset's "Rolla" and Rimbaud's "Soleil et Chair." The punishment is represented through images of sickness and decay, the accomplices of these sickly men are "chétives" (10) and even the women who are pregnant with their "fruits misérables" (11) shall perish as the earth will perish. The prophetic note is lent yet more force with this image of the woman pregnant with a cancerous fetus: it breaks all conventions of pregnant mothers as symbols of hope and a new future. This deliberate subversion of a conventional image of hope aims at producing an affect of fright in the reader through the further suggestion that there is no cure for this irreversible process of decay.

Against a background of cosmic decay, doom and despair, the reader is led back to the circus fairground and the Montreur who pronounces his "boniment" (14). So far this "boniment" reads like a simple sales pitch, as it should be. If it strays at all from the circus code it does so by replacing the freak, so common at a circus ground, by a "Femme d'Autrefois" (18). The rest is, given the context, grammatical. "Spectacle" (15) is part of the code and the "vivante" (17) overdetermined by the idea of a *un phénomène vivant*,<sup>9</sup> refers the reader again to the title of the text.

It is from line 14 onwards that the text of this "boniment" undergoes a remarkable transformation. From the prosaic sales talk it enters the terrain of the literary with its intertextual, mythological, and philosophical allusions, thus breaking down the boundaries between the two independent codes of the solar/cosmic and that of the low-life of the circus. The next few lines are an attempt to present an ideal of beauty, imagination and inspiration.

The "folie," (19) "originelle et naïve" (19), all carrying the motif of inspiration and originality, offers a contrast with the decaying masses that are gathered at the fair. The "extase d'or" draws from the grammar of eulogies on a beautiful woman's hair and Mallarmé's prose-poem "La Déclaration Foraine" (another text where the woman's beauty is presented from a platform to the masses at a fair) presents a very similar scene:

"La chevelure vol d'un flamme à l'extrême  
Occident de désirs pour la tout deployer  
Se pose (je dirais mourir un diadème) . . ." (OC, 282)



This idealized goddess's hair is gold, which conventionally represents innocence and perfection. This woman's hair is referred to as a living fire in "La Declaration Foraine" and from Baudelaire's "La Chevelure" the reader may recall "Extase!" (3) and finally the reader can be led to recognize the "extase d'or" as containing almost exactly the hypogram of the toison d'or. All these associations carry a suggestion of the supernatural, that meets the readerly expectation generated by the word "phénomène."

The figure of the "Femme d'Autrefois" is a familiar one to the reader: it is a proto-Venus figure. Her nudity and the perfection of her body sexualize her image: her "corps" (23) is described to have a "chair heureuse" (24), her breasts, while carrying the seme of maternity in the "lait éternel" (25) are hard as if also with desire and her supple legs "qui garde le sel de la mer première" (26-27) are turned into sexual objects with the gustatory allusion. All of this may remind the reader of Botticelli's image of Aphrodite rising from the sea or "La Naissance de Vénus." Even though the woman is of yore, she is remarkably well-kept and seems to be bursting with fecundity and the vitality of life: thus the "phénomène" is overdetermined by the Greek meaning of *phaino* which is *briller*.

The "nudité sanglante de ses lèvres" (21-22) offers the first possibility of a double reading. On the one hand the bloody nudity of her lips are a periphrasis of ruby lips, or "lèvres vermeilles"; if ruby lips are traditionally a standard icon of beauty, then the blood takes this seme of redness even further, to an extreme. The blood inserts also an erotic element into the description of these lips. However, at the same time, the blood in this passage describing a fecund, maternal and archetypal Ur- Mother/Woman subverts the code of Ideal Beauty that the text has already introduced as a theme and evokes the monstrous, meeting the reader's expectation of the freak, generated earlier by the circus code. This legitimizes the use of the word "boniment" (which can mean a "parade de charlatan" or "ce qui peut tromper"<sup>10</sup>): the reader has been delivered with a monster after having been explicitly promised a beautiful goddess.

The reader proceeds to read the passage as a marked contrast between the "Femme d'Autrefois" and the sickly decrepit crowd that huddles closer together to have a look at this marvel. This is bound also with the decadent imagery located earlier in the text

and "se rappelant leurs pauvres épouses, chauves, morbides et pleines d'horreur" (27-28) is read also in terms of the previous description of the "Femme d'Autrefois": as this Woman has "une extase d'or" for hair, these men are "chauves" (28) and as her "chair" (24) is "heureuse" (24) they are "morbides et pleines d'horreur" (28).

The last paragraph picks up the tone of prophecy that the narrator in the text had used towards the beginning of the poem. The tense shifts abruptly to the future. The gist of this particular paragraph is a prophecy that says that most men of this blighted age will meet the image of this Ideal Beauty with blankness for they are completely incapable of comprehension; however, the poets will be rejuvenated at the sight of this Muse and will, for a moment, experience inspirational glory. That this "Femme d'Autrefois" serves the function of the Muse is made explicit here, for it is said, at the first sight of her, "les poètes de ces temps, sentant se rallumer leurs yeux éteints, s'achemineront vers leurs lampe" (35-7). The reader, if she knows that the "lampe" in Mallarméan idiolect is associated with the creativity of the poet, knows that this is a reference to the allegorical lamp of the poet. The poem ends with this arrested image of the *hommage* of the *poètes maudits* before this dazzling vision of beauty as despair and darkness close in on them from the outside.

The literary clichés recognized by the reader have guided her to the significance of this text. The title indicates at first the two levels of meaning and significance through its double reference: the first to a woman representing idealized Beauty against a background of decay and despair, and the second to the possibility that this Beauty might be of a monstrous nature.<sup>11</sup> Thus the two "phénomènes" are merged into one identity by the "boniment" but whatever be the nature of this strange Muse, it brings forth inspiration and poetry is immanent.

To conclude, the primary purpose of this paper has been to probe into the possibility of providing a theoretical model of reading that takes into account the need in theory to revitalize the idea of textual monumentality and to explore the dynamic between an active reader that pries a text open and an autonomous text that colludes with her to produce significance.

## Appendix A

### *Defining Terms: Some Methodological Notes*

To implement my model and to demonstrate the mapping effect on a text, I have had to create a few conventions and introduce some new terminology. I introduce and explain these below:

#### I. Conventions:

##### A) Segmentation:

In order to follow through the process of reading I have dissected the text into several segments; for the most part the segments have been according to their natural breaks in paragraphs, but on occasion I have taken advantage of appropriate junctures or pauses in the narrative.

##### B) Underlining:

The underlined sections are the highlighted portions that are a result of the reader's prioritization of the text. These are tools that the reader uses to impose a structure on the text. This does not mean that the other sections are necessarily inconsequential to that reading. A basic infrastructure of the text can be arrived at without exhausting all the possibilities of the text; any additional sign overlooked by a reading will simply build further on this structure. Furthermore, any other system of recognized clichés, generating and meeting other expectations in other readers will produce independent but structurally similar orderings of the text.

##### C) Parentheses:

What lies within the parentheses indicate the way the reader first reads the signs that she encounters. A parenthesis will describe the function of the recognized syntagm for the reader; that is whether the syntagm refers to a particular code or theme. As soon as any sign is recognized by the reader to be a part of a general descriptive system, an expectation is generated in her.

#### II. Terminology within the parentheses:

##### A) SYN: It stands for a syntagm, a phrase of words bound by grammar. It is however, in this particular context, somewhat more specific. It is the recognizable syntagm that comes to the reader suggesting a new motif in the text. It is still not bound to any already appeared syntagm and the reader isolates it in order to bind it with other syntagms, which shall be represented as Syn.1.a, Syn.1.b and so forth.

I have argued that in the reading process the reader recognizes literary clichés which generate certain expectations. In my reading of Mallarmé, however, we see that the reader's segmentation

and prioritization of the text is not determined solely by literary clichés. Any syntagm may generate the expectation and the literary clichés help the reader perceive the suggested motif as a structurally significant motif in the text.<sup>12</sup> In the schematically highlighted segments I have not attempted to distinguish between the literary clichés and the other syntagms that give the reader information about what codes the text is going to use or what themes it is going to actualize.

- B) MOD: It stands for module; in cybernetic theory it is a defined cluster, in my model it is a cluster of words and a governing component of a text. A module may be a theme, a code or even a general descriptive system that becomes a central and repetitive structure in the text. Syntagms become modules after a few repetitions or variations. There may be several principal modules in the text setting up an architecture of the text where different syntagms refer to these respective modules. Syntagms that are also repetitive motifs in the text but are not principal motifs do not attain the status of a module.
- C) a, b, c: stand for extensions of a syntagm or a module.
- D) cf: stands for a reference to a previous syntagm or module.
- E) x: Extension of a parallel syntagm or module by way of affirmation.
- F) Extension of a parallel syntagm or module by way of opposition.

Before I document the mapping effect in Appendix B, let me offer a brief synopsis of the actual process: a reader isolates in her mind the first signifier that she encounters. She retains this in her memory in order to bind it on the basis of a semantic relation with other syntagms in the text. A few such bindings lead to a module, and a repetition of the same procedure generates more modules. The reader identifies these as modules in the text. Based upon the expectations now triggered by these modules she identifies other syntagms as extensions of the principal modules of the text. Therefore any given section of the text may look like the following:

...Syn.1, Mod.1)...(Syn.2, Mod.1.a)... (Syn.3, Mod.1.b. cf, x. Syn.1) and so on.

One may wonder about the point of developing this seemingly complicated and elaborate sign-system to describe a process that one believes should come naturally and instinctively to any reader. At the same time, most of us recognize in ourselves an urge to organize a complex polysemous text in order to make sense of it. I have tried to provide a language for this rather complex process of ordering the text.

## Appendix B

### Segment 1.

"Un ciel pâle (Syn.1) sur le monde qui finit de décrépitude (Mod.1, code: apocalyptic, cf. Syn.1), va peut-être partir avec les nuages (Mod.1.a): les lambeaux de pourpre usée des couchants déteignent (Mod.1.b) dans une rivière dormant à l'horizon submergé de rayons et d'eau. Les arbres s'ennuient (Mod.2, Mallarméan poetic intertext, *Plainte d'Automne*, theme: decadence) et, sous leur feuillage blanchi (Mod.2.a) (de la poussière du temps (Mod.2.b theme: decadence, topos: passing time) que celle des chemins), monte la maison de toile du Montreur de choses Passées (Mod.3 code: circus) maint réverbère attend le crépuscule (poetic chronos, lyrical) et ravive les visages d'une malheureuse foule (Syn.2), vaincue par la maladie immortelle et le péché des siècles (Mod.1.c & Mod.2.c), d'hommes près de leurs chétives complices (Syn.3) enceintes des fruits misérables avec lesquels périra la terre. (Mods.1.d & 2.d: code: apocalyptic, theme: decadence)

### Segment 2.

"Dans le silence inquiet de tous les yeux suppliant là-bas le soleil qui, sous l'eau, s'enfonce avec le désespoir d'un cri, (Mod.1.e) voici le simple boniment: (Mod.3.a) "Nulle enseigne ne vous régate du spectacle intérieur (Mod.3.b) car il n'est pas maintenant un peintre capable d'en donner une ombre triste. J'apporte, vivante (et préservée à travers les ans par la science souveraine) une Femme d'Autrefois" (Mod.3.c, cf. title) (12-16).

### Segment 3.

"Quelque folie, originelle et naïve, (Mod.4, theme: beauty and inspiration, Syn.3 cf. y. Syn.2) une extase d'or (Mod.4.a, Syn.4. cf. y. "chétives," Syn.3), je ne sais quoi! par elle nommé sa chevelure, se ploie avec la grâce des étoffes autour d'un visage qu'éclaire la nudité sanglante de ses lèvres (Mod.4.c, Syn.5) A la place du vêtement elle a un corps (cf. x. Syn.5); et les yeux semblables aux pierres rares (Mod.4.d), ne valent pas ce regard qui sort de sa chair heureuse (Mod.4.e): des seins levés (Mod.4.f, cf. x. Syn.5) comme s'ils étaient pleins d'un lait éternel (Mod.5 seme: the maternal), la pointe vers le ciel (beauty?) aux jambes lisses qui gardent le sel de la mer première (Mod.4.g, Mod.5.a).

### Segment 4.

"Se rappelant leurs pauvres épouses, chauves (Mod.4.h, cf. y: "une extase d'or"), morbides et pleines d'horreur (Mod.4.i, cf. y. "chair heureuse"), les maris se pressent: elles aussi par curiosité, mélancoliques (cf. y. "heureuse"), veulent voir."



## Segment 5:

"Quand tous auront contemplé la noble créature (Mod.3.d, seme: ideal), vestige de quelque époque déjà maudite (cf. x. Mod.2.c "péché des siècles"), les uns indifférents, car ils n'auront pas eu la force de comprendre (Mod.6 theme: élite vs. la foule), mais d'autres navrés (cf. mélancoliques) et la paupière humide de larmes résignées se regarderont; tandis que les poètes de ces temps, (Mod.6.a élite) sentant se rallumer (Mod.4.i) leurs yeux éteints, s'achemineront vers leur lampe, (Mod.4.j), le cerveau ivre un instant d'une gloire (Mod.4.k, Mod.6.b) confuse, hanté du Rythme (Mod.6.c) et dans l'oubli d'exister à une époque qui survit à la beauté. (Mod.4.l, Mod.6.d: ideal/poetry/inspiration).

## Appendix C

## The Mapping Effect

## Segment 1.

"Un ciel pâle (Syn.1) sur le monde qui finit de décrépitude (Mod.1, code: apocalyptic, cf. Syn.1), va peut-être partir avec les nuages (Mod.1.a): les lambeaux de pourpre usée des couchants déteignent (Mod.1.b) dans une rivière dormant à l'horizon submergé de rayons et d'eau. Les arbres s'ennuient (Mod.2, Mallarméan intertext, *Plainte d'Automne*, theme: decadence) et, sous leur feuillage blanchi (Mod.2.a) de la poussière du temps (Mod.2.b, theme: decadence, topos: passing time) que celle des chemins, monte la maison de toile du Montreur de choses Passées (Mod.3, code: circus) maint réverbère attend le crépuscule (poetic chronos) et ravive les visages d'une malheureuse foule, (Syn.2) vaincue par la maladie immortelle et le péché des siècles (Mod.1.c & Mod.2.c), d'hommes près de leurs chétives complices (Syn.3) enceintes des fruits misérables avec lesquels périra la terre (Mods. 1.d & 2.d: code: apocalyptic, theme: decadence).

## Segment 2.

Dans le silence inquiet de tous les yeux suppliant là-bas le soleil qui, sous l'eau, s'enfonce avec désespoir d'un cri (Mod.1.e), voici le simple boniment (Mod.3.a): "Nulle enseigne ne vous régale du spectacle intérieur (Mod.3.b) car il n'est pas maintenant un peintre capable d'en donner une ombre triste. J'apporte, vivante (et préservée à travers les ans par la science souveraine) une Femme d'Autrefois (Mod.3.c, cf. title).

## Segment 3.

Quelque folie, originelle et naïve (Mod.4, theme: beauty and inspiration, Syn.3, cf. y. Syn.2), une extase d'or (Mod.4.a, Syn.4 cf. y. "chétives," Syn.3), je ne sais quoi! par elle nommé sa chevelure, se ploie avec la grâce des étoffes autour d'un visage qu'éclaire la nudité sanglante de ses lèvres

(Mod.4.c, Syn.5). *A la place du vêtement* elle a un corps (cf. x. Syn.5); et *les yeux semblables aux pierres rares* (Mod.4.d) ne valent pas ce regard qui sort de *sa chaire heureuse* (Mod.4.e): *des seins levés* (Mod.4.f, cf. x. Syn.5) comme s'ils étaient *pleins d'un lait éternel* (Mod.5 seme: the maternal), la pointe *vers le ciel* aux jambes lisses qui gardent *le sel de la mer première* (Mod.4.g, Mod.5.a).

#### Segment 4.

Se rappelant leurs pauvres épouses, *chauves* (Mod.4.h, cf. y: "une extase d'or"), *morbides et pleines d'horreur* (Mod.4.i, cf. y. "chair heureuse"), les maris se pressent: elles aussi par curiosité, *mélancoliques* (cf. y. "heureuse"), veulent voir."

#### Segment 5.

Quand tous auront contemplé la *noble créature* (Mod.3.d seme: ideal), *vestige de quelque époque déjà maudite* (cf. x. Mod.2.c "péché des siècles"), les uns indifférents, car ils *n'auront pas eu la force de comprendre* (Mod.6, theme: élite vs. la foule), mais d'autres *navrés* (cf. mélancoliques) et la paupière humide de larmes résignées se regarderont; tandis que *les poètes de ces temps* (Mod.6.a: élite), *sentant se rallumer* (Mod.4.i) *leurs yeux éteints*, *s'achemineront vers leur lampe* (Mod.4.j), le cerveau ivre un instant d'une *gloire* (Mod.4.k, Mod.6.b) confuse, *hanté du Rythme* (Mod.6.c) et dans l'oubli d'exister à *une époque qui survit à la Beauté* (Mod.4.l, Mod.6.d: ideal/poetry/inspiration).

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A graphic effect of mapping is shown in Appendix B.

<sup>2</sup> Hegel's ideas, Ursula Franklin points out in her book, may have come distilled to Mallarmé through a contemporary article by Edmond Schérer. In his article Schérer talks about how Hegel claimed that the universe had something in common with man and that the "vraie réalité" is not matter but mind. The object is only the "corps de l'idée" and the "phenomenon" is only an expression of the law. Whether Mallarmé ever actually read Schérer or Hegel is debatable and immaterial; we do know however that Hegelian ideas were popular and fashionable with the Symbolists. Thus it provides the late nineteenth-century poetry with a rich source of words and terminology loaded with meaning that the poet and the reader could refer to and recognize.

<sup>3</sup> Ursula Franklin, *An Anatomy of Poesis*, North Carolina Studies in Romance Language and Literature, (Valencia: Artes Graficas Soler, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> There exists a plethora of books discussing and explaining this cult of decadence in the nineteenth century, offering historical, sociological

and psychological reasons for the spread of this cult: Otto Spengler has an excellent study on this, Max Nordau offers some intriguing ideas too.

<sup>5</sup> Definitions from the Grand Larousse du 19e siècle.

<sup>6</sup> Definition from the Dictionnaire Grand Larousse du 19e siècle.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> Grand Larousse du 19e siècle.

<sup>9</sup> Grand Larousse du 19e siècle.

<sup>10</sup> Grand Larousse du 19e siècle.

<sup>11</sup> This may recall the alternate descriptive system of Beauty from Baudelaire's "Hymne à la Beauté": "O Beauté! Monstre énorme, effrayant, ingénu."

<sup>12</sup> In other words, all syntagms that the reader highlights are not literary clichés.

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## "Romantic Effects": The Difficulties and Usefulness of Literary Criticism

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Naomi E. Silver

Congress and the taxpayers deserve a little less romancing and a lot more reality about where the arts and humanities are today.

Lynne Cheney, "Mocking America at U.S. Expense"

What is literary criticism, and what is it up to today? "Risk and Resolution: Literary Criticism at the *Fin-de-Millénaire*," the title of this conference, would seem to invite us to reflect on these questions and take stock of the stakes, status, risks and purposes of literary criticism at the close of our 20th century. The urgency of this kind of reflection and stock-taking in these days of budgetary turmoil hardly needs underscoring. Indeed, as the stock of the humanities—and academia in general—in the eyes of both elected officials and the public at large continues to fall, the need for aggressive stock-taking and self-study becomes more and more urgent. All of which seems to make good practical sense. If we cannot figure out who we are and what we are doing, how can we possibly market our services in an increasingly difficult marketplace of ideas? Understanding what we are doing would seem to be the essential condition of our continued existence.

Yet, there would seem to be difficulties associated with ascertaining "where the arts and humanities are today"—difficulties neither negligible, merely local, nor accidental to this kind of reflection. Starkly put, there would seem to be something inherent to the work of literary criticism that makes it particularly difficult to take stock of what has been done and what literary critics are currently engaged in doing. Which is not at all to say that such stock-taking is inconsequential or that literary criticism should be exempted from it. Paradoxically enough, literary criticism may in fact achieve its greatest rigor and its highest value—both intellectual and socio-cultural—in a mode of questioning and self-questioning that so far has yielded plenty of insights but no definitive answers and little straightforward factual knowledge.

The reasons for this difficulty—a difficulty at the same time debilitating and enabling—are perhaps worth spelling out in some detail. They become legible whenever and wherever there is the possibility, in language, of distinguishing between different ways of using words, literally or figuratively for instance, or between different modes or operations of language, the constative and performative modes for example. Wherever and whenever it becomes possible to make such distinctions, the rigor and value of literary criticism are both demonstrated and at the same time immediately called into question. For the possibility of telling the difference between a literal referent and a figure of speech, or between a sheerly descriptive utterance and one that enacts what it says, it turns out, coincides with the impossibility of systematizing these distinctions into discrete units of communicable knowledge.

When, in her opinion piece “Mocking America at U.S. Expense,” Lynne Cheney asks for an accounting of “where the arts and humanities are today,” or makes a morally charged demand regarding what “Congress and the taxpayers deserve [to know],” she engages in a version of the kind of stock-taking discussed above. Such stock-taking on her part, in and of itself, is perhaps not particularly remarkable. After all, Cheney, as former chairperson of the National Endowment for the Humanities, can be presumed to have opinions about the current state of affairs in the humanities. What is of greater interest is that Cheney frames her evaluation as a narrative interpretation of the present situation and, in calling for more truthful accounts of what is really happening in the humanities today, she bases her argument on a distinction and opposition between “romancing” and “reality.” In so doing, she nicely illustrates both the pitfalls and the importance of doing literary criticism.

Cheney would seem here, on the one hand, to be requesting some hard, factual, *literal* information about the present situation: not romance but reality is what we need in order to know accurately where the arts and humanities stand. At the same time, on the other hand, it is clear that Cheney is not asking for a map with push-pins telling her where all artists and humanities professors reside, but rather for some kind of more-than-literal narrative *interpretation* describing the “position” or “value” of the arts and humanities communities at the present time. While she asks for



"reality," her demand situates us not on any solid ground of facts and reference, but leaves us suspended, so to speak, in a space of storytelling.

We would be wrong, therefore, to interpret the opposition in Cheney's sentence between "reality" and "romancing" as referring to any neat distinction between something like "solid facts" and "mere fancy." Rather, her opposition works to differentiate between two kinds of *representation*: those that are supposedly literal and referential, and therefore accurate and truthful, and those that are figurative and fictional, and hence apparently imprecise, self-interested, or perhaps even deceitful. And indeed, it is the differences between these two kinds of representation that are normally designated by the terms "romance" and "realism."

So far so good. But the difficulty Cheney runs into in her act of stock-taking is in establishing that her own story about the present state of the humanities is a "realistic"—that is, a straightforwardly literal and merely descriptive—one.

A more detailed reading of Cheney's essay would probe the rhetorical status in her argument of such crucial conceptual metaphors as the notion of scholarly "evenhandedness" or that of "scholarly standards fall[ing] by the wayside," not to mention such rhetorical strategies as the demonization of something called "the academic elite" or Cheney's own narrative of innocently awakening to this "elite's" subversion of "our" cultural heritage. For our present purposes, however, it is perhaps enough to point out the coercive, even performative dimension of Cheney's statements. These statements present themselves as being merely descriptive; yet as a speech-act theorist like J.L. Austin would be quick to point out, they also *do* more. Such a statement as, "In my view, there is no longer sufficient rationale for Federal support for the [arts and humanities] endowments," for instance, is as prescriptive as it is descriptive. It contains information, to be sure, but it also pronounces a judgment and casts a vote. And these actions, carried out in words, are finally responsible for *producing*—and not merely referencing—a reality. Nor would Cheney necessarily dispute this analysis of her essay and her argument; clearly she is interested at this closing moment in her text in passing judgment and in having her judgments take effect. The crux of the analysis we are beginning here would lie in ascertaining whether, in the end, *any* part of Cheney's argument is strictly descriptive and

constative. Is it possible to isolate a rhetorically neutral first part of her essay that simply states the facts, or are even the most basic facts in this case *already* the sedimented outcome of prior figures of speech, prescriptions, and other performative utterances?

If it turns out that even Cheney's most "factual" statements are really nothing more—and nothing less—than congealed figures of speech and performative utterances posing as solid facts, then Cheney's call for "less romancing" and "more reality" on the part of the arts and humanities runs into difficulty. For, while it remains possible to identify and analyze particular speech acts and figures of speech, if one's language has a "history" that inflects it in ways that may not be intended, nor even immediately recognizable, then it becomes less and less possible to know the mode and status of one's own present act of writing. Although Cheney privileges the ostensibly literal referentiality and purely descriptive character of "realism," the story she is telling here about the present state of the arts and humanities—a story containing villains and heroes certainly, but also, and perhaps more tellingly, containing such "classic" performative speech-acts as proclamations, declarations, demands, and warnings—perhaps cannot avoid continually shading into the ungrounded and figurative space of "romance." It is for this reason, to return to an earlier assertion of ours, that the possibility of telling the difference between a literal referent and a figure of speech, or between a sheerly descriptive utterance and one that enacts what it says, coincides with the impossibility of systematizing these distinctions into discrete units of communicable knowledge.

If, with Cheney, we have begun to see what some of the *political* stakes of this difficulty of systematizing and circumscribing linguistic differences may be—on the one hand the ideological stakes of a coercively performative utterance passing itself off as a merely constative statement, and on the other hand the personal stakes of finding oneself occupying the same rhetorical territory (here that of "romance") as those one would denounce as one's opponents—I wish to turn now to another consideration of the opposition "romance" / "reality" to help us explore the *epistemological* stakes of this difficulty more fully. Henry James takes up this question in his 1907 preface to *The American* which documents his experience of writing this novel, and of rereading it for the purpose of revising it for the New York Edition of his collected works. In general, this

preface is read by James's critics as constituting his most significant statement on the generic differences between "romantic" and "realistic" fiction, and consequently it has been repeatedly culled for insights that could become the basis for a system of rules or a taxonomy of traits for distinguishing between these two linguistic modes. In this way, James's preface addresses precisely the question Cheney's essay raises: the possibility of grounding one's discourse in stable, literally referential distinctions.

However, James's particular approach to this discussion inflects it somewhat differently. It appears that he introduces these questions of genre not in order to establish some kind of system of classification, but rather as part of a process of self-questioning, of self-reflexive stock-taking, made necessary by his activity of re-reading *The American*. In a manner that interestingly echoes our analysis of Cheney, upon his rereading of *The American*, James discovers a discrepancy between the mode of writing he had believed himself to be employing during 1875 and 1876 as he serially composed the novel—that is, a referential or "realistic" mode—and the mode in which his novel now appears to him. As he puts it: "I had been plotting arch-romance without knowing it, just as I began to write it that December day without recognizing it and just as I serenely and blissfully pursued the process from month to month and from place to place, all without intention, presumption, hesitation, contrition" (25). In a genuinely critical move, and with his characteristic rigor, James makes use of this belated recognition—a recognition he finds both amusing and disturbing—to achieve a greater lucidity regarding the manner of his mystification. "If in 'The American,'" he says, "I invoked the romantic association without malice prepense, yet with a production of the romantic effect that is for myself unmistakable, the occasion is of the best perhaps for penetrating a little the obscurity of that principle" (30).

At stake for James in this work of "penetration" and clarification is his sense both of authorial control over his subject-matter and of *self*-control in his act of rendering it. This control depends upon the reliable operations of conscious intention and oversight, and to discover the possibility of their failure is highly unsettling, even if ultimately instructive. We see James's ambivalence regarding this state of affairs in the following remarks. He says, in the first place,

I somehow feel that it was lucky to have sacrificed on this particular altar [i.e., that of romance] while one still could; though it is perhaps droll—in a yet higher degree—to have done so not simply because one was guileless, but even quite under the conviction that, since no 'rendering' of any object and no painting of any picture can take effect without some form of reference and control, so these guarantees could but reside in a high probity of observation. I must decidedly have supposed, all the while, that I was acutely observing—and with a blest absence of wonder at its being so easy. (26)

James here adopts a tone of self-irony at his own youthful haplessness. But the temporal disjunction between youth and age turns out to have broader implications for his conception of "romance." James is led here to generalize the structure of this disjunction such that it indicates not simply the psychological transformations that accompany aging, but more to the point, a *linguistic* transformation that appears to take effect between the time of writing and the time of reading. He advances this possibility, stating that romance

is a question, no doubt, on the painter's part, very much more of perceived effect, effect *after* the fact, than of conscious design—though indeed I have ever failed to see how a coherent picture of anything is producible save by a complex of fine measurements. The cause of the deflexion must lie deep, however; so that for the most part we recognize the character of our interest only after the particular magic, as I say, has thoroughly operated—and then in truth but if we be a bit critically minded. (30)

To recapitulate James's process of self-reflection and stock-taking brought about by his rereading of *The American*, we have seen that James's theories of writing and authorship (most famously stated, perhaps, in his 1884 essay "The Art of Fiction" in which he declares, for instance, that "the only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life" [46]) depend upon the possibility of accurately rendering a true picture of life, a picture that is only possible via "reference and control" ("Preface" 26) and the scientific employment of "a complex of fine measurements" (30). And we have seen, too, that James had every reason to believe at the time of writing *The American* that this "control" and these "measurements" were in full effect. Nevertheless, upon rereading *The American*, James discovers that, despite



his precautions, despite his "high probity of observation" (26), what he has produced is not a picture of "reality," but an effect of "romance." "Romance" has operated without him, he now recognizes, and by means of a "particular magic" (30) it has in effect severed his writing from him, removing it from the oversight of his "intention" (25) and his "conscious design" (30).

"Romance," then, or the "romantic effect" (30), seems here to stand in for what in language necessarily intervenes at precisely those moments when the illusion of referentiality and control is at its strongest (this intervention may be something like the unintended intervention, in our analysis of Cheney, of the sedimented history of prior judgments, figures of speech, etc., into her claim for the "realism" of her story). James had believed his writing to be intelligible by virtue of his authorial intention, but what he recognizes only "after the fact" (30) is that, at the moment of his writing, he fundamentally misrecognized what he was doing.

Nor is this misrecognition on James's part a simple mistake or oversight, a local or accidental difficulty. Rather, James suggests that what his process of rereading has uncovered is an instance of a more general and necessary misrecognition—a misrecognition stemming from the impossibility of a certain kind of cognition relating to language, the impossibility of systematizing and stabilizing linguistic differences and operations. "Romance," it turns out, names something like a constitutive discontinuity operating within *all* writing, a discontinuity between the time of writing and the time of reading, between the production of an effect and the awareness that an effect has operated—a constitutive discontinuity between the intentions and efforts of an author and the writing he or she produces.

The concepts we seem to end up with in James are those of "misrecognition" and "rereading." And indeed, it may be possible to see these concepts as constituting something like the two poles of the work of literary criticism, the poles of its impossibility and its promise, of its difficulty and its usefulness. We can perhaps take James's critical act of self-reflection and the lucidity it affords him—however ambivalently he may regard it—both about his own act of writing and about the more general operations of language, as exemplary of the work of the literary critic. As I read it, one of James's central insights in this preface is that literary criticism necessarily involves the rereading and reevaluation of an



earlier act of misrecognition. To paraphrase him: the "particular magic" of language operates during the act of writing to deflect the effects of our words from our conscious intentions and recognition, but we can perceive these effects only "after the fact," and only then "if we be a bit critically minded" ("Preface" 30).

James points here to what we might call the *belatedness* of literary criticism, and also to its difficulty: we must come to a text *already* with a "critical mind" if we hope to distinguish its effects and operations, and as critics, we are always playing catch-up, trying to understand something that has already happened, trying to isolate an effect that has already operated. In this sense, literary criticism is always at best a diagnostic activity, rather than a prophylactic or preventative one. Its work involves the analysis of words, concepts, speech acts, and figures of speech, and the excavation of their historical residues and sedimentations. One element, then, of the value of this work is—by virtue of its examination of this linguistic past—its ability to give us insights into the particular force behind the deployment of specific words and concepts in the present day. On the other hand, however, the work of literary criticism does not (and cannot) involve the systematization of this analysis, or the creation of a set of rules that, by their regular application, would be able to define for us in advance and once and for all the particular force and effect—ideological or otherwise—of a word, concept, or speech situation, thereby relieving us of the need for continued application and rigor, or indeed, the need for a continued "high probity of observation" (26).

But as James's preface has shown us emphatically (as, to a lesser degree, has Lynne Cheney's opinion piece as well), even the most vigilant eye is no guarantee of reliable vision. Literary criticism, therefore, is necessarily an ongoing activity sustaining itself by its own misrecognitions, and most importantly, by the fact that the occurrence of misrecognitions in practice cannot be excluded once and for all by any advance in our knowledge or theoretical understanding. Moreover, the kinds of diagnoses literary criticism can give us are themselves speech acts, utterances conforming to certain conventions and bringing about certain effects. Consequently, the reading and writing of the literary critic, too, is in no way exempt from the misrecognitions attendant upon an authorial utterance, and is therefore itself in need of continual rereading and diagnosis.

We started this essay by asking about the stakes, status, risks, and purposes of literary criticism at the close of our 20th century. It now seems that the best response we can give to this call for an accounting and a stock-taking would have to take the following form: literary criticism is—and as James's 1907 text indicates, perhaps always has been—an ongoing activity of questioning and self-questioning whose rigor and value lies not in the systematization and organization of the answers or insights it temporarily defines, but rather in its ability to put its own uncertainty to use in the production of further acts of rereading and questioning, that may lead to further diagnoses and further insights. Such an account may not be sufficiently "rational," "realistic," or even "humanistic" for a critic like Lynne Cheney, who wants her literary meanings and values, her analytical distinctions, secured once and for all. However, it is, I think, the most tenable and ethical, and ultimately the most *productive*, diagnosis this particular act of reading and writing can define—however "romantic" such a diagnosis may be.

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# Islam, History, and the Modern Nation: Hegemony and Resistance in Contemporary Francophone Moroccan Literature

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Scott Homler

There remain a number of critical problems associated with the discussions of identity which characterize much of the debate in post-colonial literary theory. The components under discussion have been culture and ethnicity, politics and nationalism, differentiation and assimilation, forces of resistance and hegemony. A particularly grave obstacle has been the inability of post-colonial scholarship to resolve the problem of the particular and the universal in such a way as to update the exploration of difference as a proactive and non-coercive force of resistance against post-independence structures of repression. The preservation of exclusionary barriers based on ethnic or cultural particularities does not offer an effective check on the abuses of post-independence systems of power which are left in the wake of foreign domination. In the Arab world, Islam has both galvanized forces for the liberation of millions from colonial rule, but it has also sanctified numerous subsequent forms of repression, against political dissenters and women, in particular. Therefore, it is crucial that critical scholarship respond to the essential contingency, variation and change within the terms of cultural or ethnic difference.

The Maghreb offers a challenging example of the need for critical awareness of the particular social and cultural transformations in post-independence countries. In order to frame the discussion of post-colonialism in the context of the Maghreb, I will briefly discuss the positions of Frantz Fanon and Abdelkebir Khatibi, two thinkers whose work has been particularly influential. Frantz Fanon described the case of Algerian resistance to French imperial domination. To fabricate an Algerian identity undergoing material and social changes in order to fulfill itself by transcending its historically determined abjection certainly reveals much about the discourses of Marxism, psychoanalysis and racialism. One wonders however whether Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* helps at all to understand what has troubled Algeria since the liberationist doc-

trines appropriated by the FLN have been brought under wide critique.

Fanon described the psychological outlook of the colonized person in sharply oppositional terms. To overcome the subalternity imposed by colonialism, the colonized self is compelled first to objectify his experience in terms of a new identity: "La mise en question du monde colonial par le colonisé n'est pas une confrontation rationnelle des points de vue. Elle n'est pas un discours sur l'universel, mais l'affirmation échevelée d'une originalité posée comme absolue. Le monde colonial est un monde manichéiste" (Fanon 29). It is evident that the moment of interrogation is also the moment of uncompromising self-declaration for the colonized subject. Fanon stresses the originality of that declaration in quasi-curative terms. Fanon's new discourse of liberation constructs a subject which is the unified culmination of Marxist, psychoanalytic and post-colonial thinking of identity.

*Les damnés de la terre* describes the psychological and social effects of the Algerian struggle for independence against the French. Algerian identity could not help but assert itself and, given the protracted struggle against colonial rule, the assertion of absolute difference should hardly be surprising. However, the absolutism required during the struggle for independence must be superceded by a realizable democratic dialogue. Traces of such a dialogue do project themselves from writing about the independence era, in Yamina Mécharka's *La grotte éclatée* and Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma*, for example. Nor could Fanon have seen how less than thirty years later, the Islamic fundamentalists and the army would be engaged in a bloody conflict that would kill and maim tens of thousands of people. But it is indeed the same absolutism of the independence politics which helped solidify the FLN's control over governing power in Algeria and, further west, the Moroccan monarchy's absolute political and spiritual reign.

With the current state of social disintegration in Algeria and social stagnation in neighboring Morocco, we are compelled to question whether Abdelkébir Khatibi's "tierce voie" for decolonizing the intellectual and philosophical bases for criticism has contributed in any real sense to surpassing the political and cultural utopianism of Maghrebian specificity, such as has been embodied, for example, in the Sultan of Morocco's sublime return from exile to rule a grateful people. Like Fanon, Khatibi proposes



that local identity is capable of transcendence, but this time in its ultimate openness. He writes in *Maghreb pluriel* that "...nous pouvons, Tiers Monde, poursuivre une tierce voie: ni la raison ni la déraison telles que les a pensées l'Occident dans son tout, mais une subversion en quelque sorte double, qui, se donnant le pouvoir de parole et d'action, se met en oeuvre dans une différence intraitable" (Khatibi 50-1). "Reason" and "Unreason" in Occidental thought appear here to be doubly attributed, first, respectively to the West and the East within the Western imaginary, and second, as oppositional terms in an absolute logic preconfigured to the advantage of the Western ideology of conquest. The melding together of "word" and "deed" for the purposes of displacing Occidental thought is supposed to supplant the preponderance of reason and to secure the privileged premise of multiple meanings in reason's stead. The ultimate gesture becomes an affirmation of plurality. Diversity can not then be used as a sign pointing ultimately to the supremacy of the One.

Khatibi is very aware that to presuppose multiplicity as an absolute category is to compromise in two ways and in two cultures. His first concession is to absolutism, even in its guise of perpetually decentering multiplicity. A second compromise involves the logocentric unity which Muslims cling to in the Koran. This necessitates both an anthropological exploration in Islam's texts and practices for the signs of diversity and a new association of "word" and "deed." The exploration becomes the reconstruction of authentic difference, this time orbiting and reflecting an internally divided and subdivided existence. In Morocco, Sufism, saintly adoration, derviches and superstitious fear of genies (*djnoun*) are all frequently referred to as "not real Islam." But they would represent in Khatibi's thinking, the "real difference" of Maghrebian life and culture between the absolutist cultures of Muslim and Judeo-Christian civilizations.

This is also a region in which particularities are reduced to folklore for foreign and increasingly, domestic consumption, or worse, stamped out by repressive ideologies such as Islamic fundamentalism. The political and social relevance of difference is indeed in serious jeopardy. The reduction of local difference to folklore should not be blamed on Khatibi or on post-modernism.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the dominant narratives of Islam and national develop-

ment marginalize unorthodox practices and views. None of this is unique to the Maghreb.

There is a link between the "differentialism" (declaring difference in order to distinguish in absolute terms) of nationalist discourses of post-colonialism and the politics of repression in the name of national unity. This conclusion has been reached by Benedict Anderson, Geoffrey Bennington, Aijaz Ahmad and by Aziz Al-Azmeh. Yet the very terms of difference which themselves tend toward universality are also subject to social and historical variables, and those terms of difference are simultaneously used to achieve different goals by different groups. For example, Aziz Al-Azmeh writes: "Islam appears as an eminently protean category. It appears indifferently, among other things, to name a history, indicate a religion, ghettoize a community, describe a "culture", explain a disagreeable exoticism and fully specify a political programme" (Al-Azmeh 24). Who is naming whom or what "Islamic" is certainly as important as whether the nuances are indeed just. Al-Azmeh also suggests that collapsing diverse human experience into an ideologically motivated term like Islam facilitates the hegemonic reappropriation of historically-situated diverse and local forms of religious and communal identification.<sup>2</sup> There is an evident parallel in the Maghreb between religion and nation in terms of their deployment in order to appropriate and repress differences, in both opinion and practice. Abdellah Laroui posed essentially the same question in *La crise des intellectuels arabes*, "...qui ne voit que la fossilisation de la langue [koranique] et l'élection de la culture traditionnelle [monarchique] comme signe distinctif de la nationalité sont le moyen le plus décisif de maintenir vivante la pensée médiévale..." (Laroui 193). Distinctive signs of cultural identity become tools of oppression within the context of national unification.

While these national characteristics are archaic, room must be made to see the Moroccan nation as a dynamic and open framework for economic and cultural development. As open signifiers in a very new context, projected like Orthodox Islam onto Morocco's diverse people, nationality and national belonging are equally subject to intense scrutiny. Writers like Abdelhak Serhane and Mohamed Khair-Eddine are among those in the Arab world who explore the plurality of Moroccan experience within the coercive and institutionalized power structures of Islam and the modern

Islamic nation. Whereas Khatibi writes an apology for local forms of Islam, Serhane and Khair-Eddine identify those too as coercive and repressive aspects of a traditional culture at severe odds with its contemporary social context.<sup>3</sup>

Mohamed Khaïr-Eddine's novel *Agadir* is perhaps the most subversive francophone novel yet written in Morocco. In its direct and overt attack on the pillars of Moroccan national identity, Khaïr-Eddine places into question both the ways in which Maghrebian nationality and selfhood are transmitted and preserved and the actual sustainability of a collective identity fabricated through the genealogy and archaeology of ultimately refutable knowledge. The interrogation of cultural and national identity is simultaneously personal and subjective, and the prognosis for a concrete definition of an authentic self is far from conclusive:

A vrai dire je ne connais pas l'Histoire. Ni la mienne ni celle de mon pays. Peut-être ai-je une histoire. Je ne sais pas. Il est possible que j'en aie une, à moi. Cette ville aussi doit en avoir une. A peu près comme la mienne. Pas tout à fait. Non pas comme la mienne. Alors je vous dis que l'histoire n'existe pas. (Khaïr-Eddine 86)

What history has come to represent, the narrator muses, is a basic chronology of arbitrary construction which seems to bear little resemblance to the conscious existence of a narrator charged with the reconstruction of social order. In the wake of a major earthquake, the city of Agadir is reduced to rubble and is in this sense the scene for great social and cultural renewal. The text points out, however, that while the city may be rebuilt, there is no way of retrieving social and historical continuity. Memory itself is a false and deceiving construction. Khaïr-Eddine's text effectively destabilizes the metaphysical pretensions of the monarchy, of Islam and of traditional culture. Among survivors of the catastrophe, the novel's narrator wistfully acknowledges a stubborn unwillingness to relinquish the trappings of their former lives. The human subject is loathe to abandon its cultural baggage, even if culture is ultimately a construction without absolute value.

The narrator's description of the plans for the reconstruction of Agadir reflect a central national and military authority's concerted efforts to efface traces of past human culture. The archaic, disorganized city of the past will be replaced by a city of geometric

design, "UNE VILLE EN CINQ BRANCHES AYANT UN CENTRE VIDE CIRCULAIRE" (123). The sterile geometry of the new Agadir reminds one, of course, of abstract Islamic design, but also of the wide boulevards leading to the Arch de Triomphe in Paris. But beyond the city's smooth surfaces, the society's future is to be documented in a single book, "où iraient se ranger d'elles-mêmes les idées de chaque citoyen" (125). This represents the single narrative of humanity reduced to its biological existence, in which "ideas" are natural and are naturally organizable. We come to the precipice of both word and deed, culture and nature, for this is a society in which renewal relies on the elimination of the mythic elements of identity, not to restore the subject to its whole existential self. The narrator realizes the impossibility of such a task. He states: "Ce qui compte: aboutir à des conclusions qui se tiennent. Peu importe leur véracité" (49). Rather than attempt to confirm an identity which inevitably alienates reality that it can not accomodate, the provisional solution is to attempt to meet minor local demands of people as they struggle for mere survival.

Abdelhak Serhane's *Le soleil des obscurs* offers another perspective on the same distressing trend toward dehumanization and urbanization in Moroccan society. The novel examines the fragility of the individual psyche under increasingly difficult social circumstances. These include the rapid and uncharted transformation of traditional rural tribal society into homogeneous Islamic Moroccan identity, the pressure of out-migration and widespread bureaucratic and personal corruption. The narrative focuses on the marriage of Soltane and Mina. Their union is planned during a period of serious decline in the social and economic fabric of their village. The optimism and jubilation with which their elders plan and execute the marriage ceremony are dashed by Soltane's sexual disfunction and Mina's exaggerated shame. The fortunes of Soltane and Mina are hyperdetermined by their social surroundings, even as the text suggests interference by the evil spirit of possession, Aicha Qandisha. There is little Soltane and Mina can do to empower themselves, other than Soltane's arguably successful plan to disassociate himself from the pressures of village life through out-migration.

*Le soleil des obscurs* also calls into question the ability of Islam to fulfill its role as the institution guaranteeing justice and fraternity. The text recognizes that the association of Moroccan Islam



with the monarchy tends to extend subjugation to the regime even into the mosque itself, thereby defaming the very integrity of Islam. An extraordinary turn of events occurs in which a bird in the mosque actually pecks his way into the brain of the preaching *imam*. Out of the *imam*'s head comes the "fibre de mensonge." The rest of the sermon is a lucid detour through what must be the very thoughts of the author:

Réveillez-vous et secouez les cadavres de vos vieux! Débarassez-vous de cette lassitude inventée pour vous paralyser dans la stagnation. L'Etat réclame de vous des sacrifices sans cesse. Il veut un doigt. Et quand vous vous apprêtez à lui en sacrifier deux, il réclame le bras entier. Alors commence le massacre des populations sans défense! (Serhane 45)

Serhane suggests that resistance to state repression can emerge from within the religious congregation, even while the King is the de facto "commander of the faithful." The mosque has indeed been the seat of anti-government activity in neighboring Algeria. Such resistance can not take hold in *Le soleil des obscurs*. For as the renegade *imam* is declared *officially* insane, the mosque will continue to prop up the officialdom of a dehumanizing regime. In the Arab world, Islam's integrity as a distinct component of identity has been seriously challenged, particularly given the number of military conflicts which have erupted. It can hardly be a liberating force for a future generation of Moroccans, as it may have been at the time of independence, unless the terms of modernity are modified to reflect Morocco's concrete social and political circumstances.

The *imam* in Serhane's text has identified the state as the singular obstacle to the people's self-determination, and he preaches the people's power to overcome any force of oppression. This kind of liberationist ideology reminds one of the independence rhetoric of the 1950s, but it comes well after a reconfiguration of the terms of Maghrebian culture. State bureaucracy, greed and archaic social practices which limit individual self-expression are the inimical forces. Both Khaïr-Eddine and Serhane force us to reconsider the assumptions of post-colonial thinking if we are to grasp the importance of their social critique in its contemporary context. Absolute difference and absolutist plurality have failed to hold particular, local forms of repression accountable, nor have they



enabled individuals to rise above the institutions which organize the experience of identity. Post-colonial studies will continually need to be brought into alignment with the diverse and evolving conditions under which its privileged concepts such as identity and difference are employed.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Winifred Woodhull, Khatibi's third compromise takes place on the very level of local politics. Woodhull argues that by reducing cultural debate on difference to a radical difference on the level of the sign, post-structuralism stymies concrete efforts at the self-determination of particular oppressed groups. See *Transfiguration of the Maghreb*.

<sup>2</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr explains how Islam represents, on the one hand, revealed truth, in itself timeless and unattached to any historical event, as well as a system of beliefs which encompasses all aspects of the historically situated physical and spiritual life of the believer. *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World*. (Chicago: Kazi Publications, Inc., 1994). It is of course the question of historically and socially determined aspects of culture which are most perturbing to Islam.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on the issue of assimilation of cultural transformation in Islamic countries, see Tibi's *Islam and the Cultural Accommodation of Social Change* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

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# World Literature and Economic Hegemony: Free-Trade Imperialism and 'Whole Populations Conjured Out of the Ground' in *The Communist Manifesto*

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Chris Andre

The concept of world literature follows historical trends in international economic development, and emerges most forcefully at moments of systemic consolidation. This relationship between the concept of world literature and the state of economic development has been consistent throughout the century and a half of its existence, and continues into the present moment. This can be seen in the most recent manifestation of the concept, beginning in the late 1980s, which figures as the ideological justification of the post-hegemonic system of multinational capitalism. Prior to this, the concept of world literature had functioned as the ideological legitimation of U.S. hegemony, for during the 1960's the emergence of the Latin American Boom and decolonization-era African literatures gave credence to U.S. claims that its hegemonic dominance was productive of the world-wide development of culture.<sup>1</sup> The term "world literature" has shifted remarkably during its historical life, mutating to fulfill a perennial conceptual need for an emblem of the supreme cultural development linked inextricably to each particular stage of economic development.

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels present a cultural teleology tied to the perpetual expansion of the capitalist mode of production.

In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (22)

The logic of this move, from "national and local literatures" to "a world literature," is entirely consistent with Marx's understanding of intellectual history as a dependent of economic history. With the liberalization of trade under British hegemonic authority, capitalism spread throughout the world; as a seemingly necessary result, local manifestations of intellectual culture would become enmeshed within a unified intellectual system in a process not unlike that of the subsumption of local economies into international commerce. Marx's concept of "whole populations conjured out of the ground" (Manifesto 23) reflects a movement toward nation-building within the development of a more pervasive economic system, and for Marx it is in the conceptual space between inter-state finance and national politics that "world literature" might be said to have its proper home.

I will be addressing this particular problem, that of the expansion of literature into a unified world-wide system, as an intellectual construction that corresponds to the economic moment within which it operates. In order to assess Marx's position properly, I would like to present a trajectory of positions on this question and simultaneously to place this trajectory within an economic framework based on the progressive expansion of interstate commerce. Each intellectual position corresponds to a particular moment in the development of this socio-economic system and seems to articulate the ideological concerns and demands of the system at diverse historical moments. I will thus move from Goethe, who originated the concept of "world literature," through Marx and Engels, whose position we have just seen, and finally to Gramsci, who theorized the development of something that could be called "world literature" but was obviously responding to economic concerns quite different from either Goethe's or Marx's. The terminus of this trajectory is not, however, Gramsci, for while the contemporary situation of interstate trade differs greatly from that faced by Gramsci, the problem of "world literature" continues to be posed.

The key issue regarding all of these positions will be the situation of each particular conceptualization of "world literature" vis-à-vis "world hegemony," or the dominant ideological formation which allows one particular state to control the economic destinies of a number of other sovereign states. Some recent scholars, particularly Wallerstein and Arrighi, have described the

development of the world economy through the successive operations of world hegemonic orders, its most profound shifts in world order coming with the establishment of British hegemony in the early nineteenth century, and US hegemony in the early twentieth century. Goethe, and by association Hegel, write throughout the early development of British free-trade imperialism, while Marx and Engels write throughout the duration of a consolidated British hegemonic system. Gramsci's work is from the early days of US hegemonic dominance, while the current situation of "world literature" must be understood in light of the collapse of US hegemony.

Toward the end of his long career as one of the dominant European intellectuals, Goethe became increasingly concerned with a concept that he termed "world literature." During the last years of his life he posed this problem numerous times, both in his theoretical writings and in his conversations with Eckermann. In his earlier writings, notably his "Response to a Literary Rabble-Rouser" (1795),<sup>2</sup> Goethe had stressed the importance of developing a unified German national literature, of constructing a "cultural center" that would provide the proper environment for the production of a unified literature. It was only in the aftermath of the Settlement of Vienna (1815), as Britain reorganized the inter-state system along the lines of free-trade imperialism, that Goethe began to discuss the possibilities of a "world literature."

In his essay "On Carlyle's *German Romance*" (*Essays* 206-208), Goethe describes the situation of national literatures in terms of the emergent system of inter-state politics and commerce:

[We] do have hope that unavoidable controversies will gradually become less acrimonious, wars less cruel and victory less arrogant. What points and works toward this goal in the literatures of nations, is what all nations have to recognize. We must get to know the particular characteristics of nations in order to understand them, to be able to have dealings with them. For these idiosyncrasies are like language and currency: they not only facilitate dealings among nations, they make them possible. (207)

Literature functions here as the embodiment of the character of individual nations, as the essential difference which must be understood for an amiable inter-state system to function effi-

ciently. Like language for inter-state political exchange and currency for inter-state economic exchange, literature serves Goethe as a medium of exchange for national idiosyncrasies, as the common intellectual medium through which the characteristics and temperament of nations might be gauged.

For Goethe "world literature" represents neither the effacement of difference between nations, nor the exchange of literatures between various nations, but rather the intellectual community which is being created via the medium of literature.<sup>3</sup>

If we have dared to proclaim the beginning of a European, indeed a world literature, this does not merely mean that the various nations will take note of one another and their creative efforts, for in that sense a world literature has been in existence for some time, and is to some extent continuing and developing. We mean, rather, that contemporary writers and all participants in the literary scene are becoming acquainted and feel the need to take action as a group because of inclination and public-spiritedness. (225)

Goethe's argument here, which he himself refers to as "the free exchange of ideas," coincides with the development of inter-state economic exchange at an unparalleled rate, with the emergence of the liberalized free-exchange of goods and services under the direction of Britain. The "silent, almost secret congregation" of writers, publishers and distributors thus forms the equivalent, in the realm of literature, to the free trade espoused by British liberal ideologues.

An interesting marginal note to Goethe's program is Hegel's philosophy of the state, outlined in the *Philosophy of Right* (1821), wherein the state as an object of knowledge appears only after it has been historically superseded. When Hegel writes that "the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk" (13), he intends not only to show that philosophical systems become comprehensible only after the period they represent has entered its decline, but more specifically that the concept of the state has become a possible object of knowledge only after the age of the absolute state has entered its twilight. As with Goethe's dialectic between the socio-historical facticity of national literatures and the "public-spiritedness" of world literature, Hegel shows how the outlines of the state appear only after the thorough development



of an inter-state system. The state is revealed against a backdrop of inter-state interactions, for it is only with the emergence of this greater economic logic that the operations of the lesser social unit come into relief.

It is precisely this same shift, from the limited sphere of the nation to the ever-expanding domain of capitalism, that motivates the discussion of world literature in *The Communist Manifesto*. Here, Marx and Engels take for granted the rapid expansion of the capitalist system, to the extent that communism as they understand it must function as the political embodiment of the capitalist world-system. Proletarian interventions into national politics are only so many paving stones on the long march from the Congress of Vienna to proletarian control of the global economic system.

The problem of national identity is a crucial element of this historical movement, for while the proletariat is seen to be contained by states, their identity is not constituted by the state. Proletarian identity in practice is purely material, relating each proletarian on a purely individual level to the local forces of industrial production; Marx and Engels aspire to making proletarian identity international by forging a unified consciousness based on each proletarian's insertion into capitalist production. The intermediate stage, between these two distinct levels of consciousness, is that of the nationalized proletariat. While, to quote from the *Manifesto*, "modern industrial labour, modern subjection to capital, the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped [the proletarian] of every trace of national character" (30), it is only through the development of national proletarian political structures that Marx and Engels foresee the eventual development of an international proletariat order. "While not in substance, yet in form, the struggle of the proletariat with the bourgeoisie is at first a national struggle" (31). Thus the proletarians must first think of themselves as belonging to a particular nation, as being political subjects of their respective nations, in order to surpass the concept of the nation in the greater economic struggle for world dominance.

The year of the *Communist Manifesto*, 1848, marks an important moment in the intensification of capitalist expansion, for in this year the intensive commodification of labor under the market system finally erupted into a series of dramatic revolutions. This is the year of the great national revolutions, yet for Marx and Engels

this year also marks the transitional period between the constraints of national politics and the unfettered development of an international proletarian order.

The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself *the* nation, it is, so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word. National differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world-market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto. (40)

While the nation still exists as the basis for bourgeois identity, for the proletariat the nation is merely a political expedience through which to achieve greater economic power.

Goethe had envisaged the development of a world literature through a communion of "public-spirited" literary figures, essentially through the internationalization of bourgeois intellectuals. For Marx and Engels, the conditions which allowed Goethe to imagine this sort of world literature, especially freedom of commerce and the world-market, will lead not to the enhancement of national literatures through international cooperation, but rather to the dissolution of national culture itself. The technologies that would allow for Goethe's world literature, the newspaper in particular and transportation more generally, serve Marx and Engels as the means whereby the proletariat will be united. "This union [of the workers] is helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry and that place the workers of different localities in contact with one another" (28). The expansive logic of capital, according to Marx and Engels, produces the technical means through which the bourgeoisie will be destroyed, for the expansion of the market unites not just the bourgeoisie but also the proletariat, a proletariat theoretically lacking in national sympathies.

The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous na-

tional and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (*Manifesto* 22)

Returning to this section from the *Manifesto*, we can see the way in which Marx and Engels constitute "world literature" in a manner very different from that of Goethe. This later version of world literature is still based on the expansion of the market system, but the individuality of national literatures has been surpassed by a global unification of culture.

With the development of a single proletarian culture, emerging from "uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto" (40), comes the development of a single literature, a world literature reflecting the conditions of life under capitalism rather than the idiosyncrasies of any given national bourgeoisie. Whether Marx and Engels would see such a world literature persisting after the abolition of private property is hard to determine, for the bourgeois character of literature as it has been constituted would make such a transition difficult indeed. If literature is understood to be the deformation of social reality through language, as would seem to be the case with Marx's analysis of the "purely literary aspect" (48) of German idealist philosophy, then the absolute triumph of the proletariat would seem to instantly outmode literature in favor of a more representational form of linguistic communication. The problem of what exactly constitutes literature as a category, or, more properly, the extent to which literature as a cultural form is inextricably manacled to the capitalist world-system, will recur in the final section of this discussion.

We must first look at another position on the concept of "world literature," from the distinctly different hegemonic scenario following the transition from British free-trade imperialism to US free-world capitalism. This third position, given by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, is one which articulates the difficulties faced by a linguistically and economically peripheral nation when confronted with the systemic imperative for a world literature. Gramsci was writing in the early post World War I period, when the US was restructuring the world-system through an imposition of both the dollar-standard and the concept of national self-determination. Woodrow Wilson's establishment of the Federal Reserve System in 1913 allowed for the easy distribution of a world currency

during the restructuring of the post War global economy, while the League of Nations attempted to insure US control over the political fortunes of all sovereign states. Nationalist movements were encouraged as a means of producing a set of standardized diplomatic units, local political structures committed to the perpetuation of capitalist production, which could be used to control the movement of capital from the core states into peripheral zones. While Gramsci appreciates the U.S. hegemonic imperative for multilateral exchange, which in cultural terms corresponds to the development of a world literature, he is simultaneously faced with the imperative for national development, for the linguistic unification of Italy which would permit entry into multilateral cultural exchange.

Gramsci's debts to Marx are many, particularly with respect to his development of a "philosophy of praxis" (*Prison Notebooks* 332), or the cultural expression emerging from the conditions of the industrial worker. Such a philosophy must, however, address itself to the particular cultural formations allied against it, and in this Gramsci's focus is more consistently on the national level than was Marx's. It must be remembered that between the *Manifesto* and the *Prison Notebooks*, the workers of Europe had been efficiently nationalized by means of increased suffrage, higher wages, and the establishment of social welfare. Gramsci's situation is thus one in which the workers need deliverance from their belief that the state and other cultural institutions (specifically the Catholic Church) represented their particular interests, and that the gains of the entire system will eventually enhance their well-being.

Gramsci's "philosophy of praxis" works primarily at the level of the individual, or the small social group, and accords perfectly with Wilsonian demands for local self-determination within a totalizing world-system. The height of individual development is the nation, for this is the culmination of local power as it exists given the current constraints of US hegemony. The closest Gramsci comes to the definition of a world literature is the concept of a network of nations connected through translation. In this formulation the question of a national language becomes crucial. Since he is writing from the position of a peripheral nation attempting to compete in the free-market system, local dialects must be eliminated in order to produce a coherent understanding of the situation of Italy in terms of this larger entity. As with the ideologues of



the French Revolution, who vowed to annihilate the local *patois* of France in order to produce a unified nation, Gramsci argues that the only means of producing a local understanding of Italy's situation vis-à-vis the world-market is to engender a national language.

Someone who only speaks dialect, or understands the standard language incompletely, necessarily has an intuition of the world which is more or less limited and provincial, which is fossilised and anachronistic in relation to the major currents of thought which dominate world history.... While it is not always possible to learn a number of foreign languages in order to put oneself in contact with other cultural lives, it is at the least necessary to learn the national language properly. A great culture can be translated into the language of another great culture, that is to say a great national language with historical richness and complexity, and it can translate any other great culture and can be a world-wide means of expression. But a dialect cannot do this. (325)

The systemic limits of Italian national culture are thoroughly inscribed in this demand for an Italian "national language," in this national development through which Italy will be granted entry into the conceptual sphere of world literature. While the completely cosmopolitan Marinetti called for an end to Italian provincialism with his attack on spaghetti, Gramsci desires to produce only a less limited form of provincialism, allowing for the perpetuation of the free-market system while better defining Italy's position as a nation among nations. Written from a peripheral nation at the onset of US hegemony, Gramsci's position requires the development of a national culture as the means of access to a world literature as either Goethe or Marx described it.

During the decades after Gramsci's death, and the height of US hegemonic power, world literature was a particularly powerful concept for the legitimation of US hegemony, if not in name then at least in theory. Successive waves of writers from peripheral nations, particularly the Boom writers of Latin America and the African novelists of the decolonization era, gave credence to US claims that the expansion of the world-system was indeed encouraging a concomitant global expansion of culture. During the collapse of US hegemony, a progressive collapse beginning sometime around 1970, the unified surface of this conception of world



literature developed a number of fissures and rifts, which were then tactfully paved over by the need for a post-hegemonic cultural legitimization of continued economic expansion.

The concept of world literature has been, and remains, a stabilizing element for national bourgeoisies, a means of producing and maintaining national loyalty through the situation of national writers within a global framework. Contemporary debates regarding the canon focus on the issue of localized identity production, and demands for multicultural curricula represent an implosion, rather than an explosion, of the meaning and use of literature in the production of identity. Such an implosion continues to occur, but it takes place within the context of a cosmopolitan cultural agenda, as it did during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. "Whole populations conjured out of the ground" (*Manifesto* 23) may be a trick of history that cannot be repeated, but once they have been conjured, once they have recognized the forces involved in their transmogrification from mud to mass, it is perhaps best to remind them that local cultural production partakes of a global logic. The current, post-hegemonic concept of world literature retains its ideological significance only insofar as the development of local culture can be linked explicitly to the continuing expansion of transnational finance, and then only through the careful planning of marketing agencies and international publishers.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In between these two moments comes that of critical theory, particularly post-structuralism, which corresponds to the dissolution of US hegemonic dominance and attendant fears (or hopes) that the global economy would collapse as a result of the dissolution.

<sup>2</sup> *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. John Gearey, trans. Ellen von Nardroff and Ernest H. von Nardroff (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1986) 189-192.

<sup>3</sup> Habermas derives his theory of the "bourgeois public sphere" from this particular understanding of "world literature," as the intellectual union of like-minded citizens across state boundaries.

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## Genre-Crossing: Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and its Discursive Community

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Hsiu-chuan Lee

This paper seeks to explore the potential of an individual's practice of writing/speaking to be politically and culturally productive. Taking Maxine Hong Kingston's controversial book *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) as a case, I will study the problematics of textual circulation dealt with in the book as well as the way in which it dramatically reflects the discursive transmission/interpretation taking place around the book. There are two reasons to choose *The Woman Warrior* as a text of investigation: First, as one of the most widely read and talked about anthologized texts among contemporary literary works, *The Woman Warrior's* circulation enacts a discursive community crossing the boundaries of genres/disciplines.<sup>1</sup> It is taught in courses and departments ranging from composition, American culture, ethnic studies, women's studies, and popular culture to postmodernism and serves as rhetorical model, autobiography, biography and even historiography. Second, not only does a multi-generic discursive community ensue from the reading and the transmission of *The Woman Warrior*; but the book itself is concerned with the problematics of textual circulation. In a sense, the telling and re-telling of stories in *The Woman Warrior* dramatically reflect the discursive transmission/interpretation taking place outside the book. While each myth/story/memory in *The Woman Warrior* branches into divergent interpretations, the narrative of the book as a whole similarly leads not to a self-contained, totalizing authorship, but to a dialogical and historical cognition.

Indeed, as the interpretive history of *The Woman Warrior* is inscribed by the development of contemporary feminist, ethnic, postmodern and, particularly, Chinese American aesthetic discourses, the multiple discursive voices inside the book are correlated with a Chinese immigrant history. As revealed in the transmission of the "no-name woman" story, *The Woman Warrior* embodies at least three different viewpoints of immigrant Chinese and/or Chinese Americans: the viewpoint of the Chinese left behind by their relatives and friends immigrating to the U.S., that

of the first generation Chinese Americans who move to the U.S. in adulthood and that of the second generation Chinese Americans who are born in America and have knowledge about China only form re-told stories. Every shift of a historical position and/or a change of the story-teller calls for a new reading/interpretation of an existing story. Or, it might be argued, underscoring each individual's attempt at story-telling/writing is her/his need to negotiate with a specific living/historical context. In either case, story-telling in *The Woman Warrior* features less a repetition of something already existing than a continuation and enlargement, if not a conversion and a distortion, of earlier stories.

Using Thomas Beebee's theory of genre as a basis, the textual transmission in and around *The Woman Warrior* reads as a continuous genre-crossing.<sup>2</sup> Beebee defines genre in terms of its "use-value." To him, generic distinction is imaginary (as distinct from symbolic) and genre is embodied in the reader's imaginary/lived relations with a text. Put another way, the genre of a text is determined at the moment when it is appropriated by a reader into a specific "use," or, when it is cast into a specific interpretation—an interpretation significant (useful) to the reader in her/his particular subject/historical position. Since meaning is impossible without the mediation of a genre or genres, each act of writing/reading/interpretation is to select/create a genre. To re-tell/reinterpret other people's stories is then to appropriate those stories into one's "use," namely, into one's "genre." Given the correlation of "genre," "meaning," and "power,"<sup>3</sup> all individual writing/speaking somehow attempts self-assertion.

Nonetheless, as a genre is generally applied to a text retroactively and no texts are "fully identical with their genres" (Beebee 19), not a single act of reading/speaking could be totalizing. A polyphonic discursive community inside and around *The Woman Warrior* is possible precisely because every reading/story-telling is open to multiple re-readings (re-uses). Each act of self-assertion/negotiation is historically based/bounded and inextricably provisional. Kingston confessed that there are "omissions" in *The Woman Warrior* she did not realize "until long after" she had finished the book. She even declared that she would "make some changes in setting" if she could rewrite *The Woman Warrior* (Lim 24-25). Moreover, since innate to each act of speaking/writing is not only a rebellion/revision of already existing stories but a



desire for a hearing (for an audience, a community), a self-asserted story-telling usually leads to a negotiation of self-other/self-community relations. The personal thus appeals—in the Bakhtinian sense—dialogically to the collective. In the following analysis, I will focus on the interaction of the different voices (or the Bakhtinian dialogized languages/genres) in *The Woman Warrior*.<sup>4</sup> My goal is to see how an individual voice, instead of being self-contained, might contribute to the cultural and the political in its participation in/enactment of a polyphonic and multi-generic discursive communality.

*The Woman Warrior* opens with the narrator Maxine's re-telling of her mother's cautionary story about her no-name aunt. This attempt at re-telling, more correctly a re-interpretation, of the no-name woman's story marks Maxine's intention to break out of her complicity with her mother's imposed silence, a complicity which has lasted for twenty years. What makes Maxine feel the need to break the silence? What makes the silence suddenly unbearable for her? Before Maxine realizes that she has to talk, the silence provides her with an illusion of emotional safety and signifying stability. Maxine tells her readers, "I enjoyed the silence. At first it did not occur to me I was supposed to talk ... It was when I found out I had to talk that school became a misery, that silence became a misery" (166). Silence becomes questionable when one sees through the illusion of its taken-for-grantedness, this which is demystifiable only when something alien is introduced into one's living world to change one's perspective on things. The new demand from school enables Maxine to see through her false enjoyment in silence before school. Similarly, she can no longer participate in her mother's silence when she has learned to see things differently from her mother. Instead of accepting the story of the no-name aunt for its cautionary use, Maxine reads it into different "genres" and in so doing puts into question the cautionary value of this story.

Indeed, Maxine's biggest contribution in the section of "No-Name Woman" is her transformation of a silence into "voice." Whereas "silence" marks the closure of a story, the termination of the act of story-telling, "voice" excavates the paradoxes inside the story by exposing its innate incompleteness. In Lacan's graph of desire, for example, "voice" is placed at the right end of his signifier vector S-S' to indicate the objectal leftover of each signi-

fying process ("quilting") or, the process of *capitonnage*. "Voice" is therefore the remnant of each signification. As something unheld, uncontrolled in meaning production, "voice" always passes to the other and thus prevents the symbolic movement from being arrested. Conversely, "silence" exerts a violent suspension of "voice." It fills up the gap between each utterance and enunciation, enforces an imaginary arrestment on the sliding signifier of the symbolic, and embodies the moment of (illusory) signification and understanding.

Hence a dominant signifying economy arises around a silence. The taboo story of no-name woman is powerful precisely because people circulate it in silence. While everyone secretly knows and believes that they understand the story without ever prying into its origins or possible ways to interpret it, the story serves as an imaginary center of the village community. The shared silence is not only a result of a shared fantasy/genre of the villagers, but also a promoter of this shared fantasy/genre. Fantasy can be understood as an imaginary scenario working to support (give consistency to) what we call "reality." Since it enables the creation of signification, it works like a genre, determining meaning production/transmission.

Although it seems that the villagers intended to banish the aunt into forgetfulness, the creation as well as the (secret/silent) remembrance of her story held the villagers together. Despite the fact that in appearance the no-name aunt was punished because she had broken the "roundness" of her village community (13), it is perhaps more correct to say that the "roundness" of the community was more conceivable after a law-breaking scapegoat was picked. As Maxine guesses, her aunt might have escaped that severe punishment if the incident had not occurred at a time when her village community was under the danger of disruption, a disruption resulting from wars, famine, floods and especially from the departure of most of the village men to work overseas. She points out that "[a]dultery, perhaps only a mistake during good times, became a crime when the village needed food" (13). Instead of following her mother's interpretation to read the no-name aunt's behavior as casting her village community into crisis, Maxine implies that the punishment was significant due to the villagers' crisis.

The "use-value" of the no-name-woman's story is thus understandable. Then why does Maxine's mother Brave Orchid need to re-tell this story when she is no longer in China? As we are told by Maxine, Brave Orchid is strongly concerned with the code of necessity. She only tells the "useful parts" of the story and she "will add nothing unless powered by Necessity, a riverbank that guides her life" (6). What then is the "use-value" or no-name-woman story to her? Why should she appeal to a "traditional" "Chinese" story in educating her daughter who was born in and grew up in America and has never been to China?

Here, it is useful to answer these questions in reference to Brave Orchid's situation as an immigrant Chinese woman in America. Before her husband sent for her, Brave Orchid was a female doctor, a slave holder and according to Maxine, a "modern" (76) and "professional" woman (77). Brave Orchid was by no means a conservative village woman when she was in China. In comparison with most of the women of her age, she was noted for her adventurous spirit and untraditional thinking. That her thinking was accepted, even admired, among her community in China is not because it was the "real," or the most correct/objective, but because she always was able to "talk" others into her fantasy/genre. A "capable exorcist" (92), she could banish whatever was incompatible with her thinking out of her living economy, just as she once talked the Sitting Ghost "out of existence" (Sato 141). However, after she arrived in America, her empowered role as a "shaman" has been jeopardized. As a woman and immigrant minority in society, she falls from respected female doctor to laundress. Failing to integrate into her living economy the new ideas and new ways of speaking/doing things in America, Brave Orchid cannot but conceal her anxiety of losing self-power by telling cautionary stories, imposing silence upon her American-born daughter.

Accordingly, when Brave Orchid asks Maxine not to "tell anyone" she has an aunt (15), she is attempting to have her daughter participate in her economy and thereby reinforces her authority perhaps not only over her daughter but over her immigrant situation in general. First, as a story-teller, she has asserted her position of knowledge; moreover, insisting that no "voice" leak out of her story, she confirms her scenario. In fact, the no-name woman's secret is not the only secret Brave Orchid attempts to

guard against disclosure. The narrator Maxine's world is filled with immigrant secrets that her parents keep cautioning her against revealing in front of Americans. Ironically, she would never know what to tell even if she wanted to because she is never told what these secrets exactly are (183). The usefulness of these secrets lies not in whatever the substance they conceal—if any—but in their formal power as secrets to consolidate the Chinese community. To the immigrant Chinese, the secrets create an illusion that there must be something essential underlying the ethnic label "Chinese" and thus elevate the Chinese to the status of the "real" while relegating the American to that of "ghost."

Unable to achieve self-fulfillment in America, Brave Orchid explains away her failure by reducing everything American into "ghosts": "This is a terrible ghost country, where a human being works her life away" (104). Failing to exert control over her children, she accuses her "American children" of being like "ghosts" who have no "feelings and memory" (115) and of not being smart enough to "tell real from false" (202). At the same time, she projects the "real" onto the life in China:

Someday, very soon, we're going back home, where there are Han people everywhere. We'll buy furniture then, *real* tables and chairs. You children will smell flowers for the first time. (98)  
[my emphasis]

Ironically, Brave Orchid never really plans to go back to China. As Maxine remarks, "my grandmother wrote letters pleading for them [her parents] to come home, and they ignored her" (108). The creation of secrets, the exorcistic gestures in facing the American "ghosts," as well as the projections of the "real" to the life in China only reflect Brave Orchid's need of self-assertion—her self-negotiation with the immigrant living condition she deems hostile.

The transmission of the no-name woman's story from the villagers to Brave Orchid exemplifies a shift of the story's "use-value." Brave Orchid appropriates the story for her personal use. She establishes an imaginary relation with the story that is different from the relation between the Chinese villagers and the original story. This shift of "use-value" could be understood as Brave Orchid's employment of a different genre in looking at the same story. The introduction of her personal needs/experiences into the story opens up the original reading and makes the story significant



in relation to her immigrant situation. Originating possibly as a story of scapegoating, the story of the no-name woman becomes a cautionary story imposing ethnic silence and complicity on Brave Orchid. When the story is further handed down to the narrator Maxine, it is her turn to re-tell the story in her own genre and produce her own interpretations. Maxine's re-telling of her mother's stories and ancient myth is not necessarily more revolutionary than Brave Orchid's story-telling. She does not re-tell her mother's stories and myth simply for the purpose of questioning her mother. Like Brave Orchid, she inscribes her personal needs into the story/myth and thereby makes the story/myth imaginarily useful to her individual life.

Maxine's focus on "use-value" is evident when she talks about the story of her no-name aunt: "Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (8). The incompleteness of Brave Orchid's version of the story offers Maxine an empty space in which to inscribe her own problems, anxieties and wishes. Her emphasis on the gender issue of the story reflects her personal concern with the prevailing sexism in her living world. Her preoccupation with the images of "silence" points to her childhood terror of not being able to speak, a terror recounted in the final section of the book.<sup>5</sup> The mentioning of the no-name aunt's bravery—the aunt's willingness to protect both her lover and her child in spite of the social consequences and her attempt to cross "boundaries not delineated in space" (8)—reveals Maxine's wish to become a law-breaking, progressive female heroine. Finally, the retelling of her aunt's loneliness and banishment from her community reminds us of Maxine's fear of being unwanted by her own family and community.

Additionally, the intended misreading of the tales of Fa Mu Lan and Ts'ai Yen also exposes Maxine's endeavor to relate the story to her own problems. The combination of the story of Yue Fei—the famous hero whose mother inscribes words on his back—with the story of Fa Mu Lan brings light to Maxine's preoccupation with the power of words. Her emphasis on "the hazards of crossing gender boundaries," as well as her assertion of Fa Mu Lan's womanhood, which she brings out by giving her a lover and having her bear a child in battle, is again attributed to her own concern with her marginalized gender position. In the story of Ts'ai Yen, Maxine further re-writes the significance of Ts'ai Yen's



return to China: in the historical story, the redemption of Ts'ai Yen is achieved when she is ransomed back to China, that is, when she is released from her detention in the barbarian land. In the narrator's version of this story, however, Ts'ai Yen's "moment of glory or validation occurs" when she "breaks out of silence into song," (Wong, "Cultural and Historical Context" 34) a song bridging the communication gap between the barbarian and the Chinese. Twisting the historical story to her own use, Maxine draws her reader's attention to the communicative function of art and validates her own position as a story-teller by filling in the gap between her Chinese parentage and her American life.

Here, in spite of a seeming mother-daughter conflict in *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine's focus on the "use-value" of story-telling makes her a good follower of Brave Orchid's code of necessity. If Brave Orchid is a capable shaman who draws a strict line between the reality and the "ghost" world and never allows "ghosts'" intrusion into her world of pragmatism, Maxine must have found in her mother a model of exorcism. In fact, a major part of *The Woman Warrior* is devoted to Maxine's quest for certainty. Repeatedly she reminds herself that her mother's stories are meant to "test" her "strength to establish realities" (5). She never ceases to question what is real and what is made-up: "I continue to sort out what is just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living" (205). When she grows up, moreover, she feels that she has to leave home because she wants to see the world "logically." She "enjoy[s] the simplicity" (204) after banishing the "ghosts," such as anything incomprehensible, from her waking "American" life:

To make my waking life American-normal, I turn on the lights before anything untoward makes an appearance. I push the deformed into my dreams, which are in Chinese, the language of impossible stories. (87)

Whereas Brave Orchid defends herself by denouncing everything beyond her control as "American," Maxine categorizes whatever is outside her conceptual logic as "Chinese." Both of them seek excuses for their failure to resolve the paradoxes in their lives under the banner of "cultural binarism." Neither of them realizes that their conflicts are derived not so much from the incompatibil-

ity of "Chinese" and "American" as from their different positions as subjects in history.

Because of *Brave Orchid* and the narrator Maxine's partial-subject position, any of their attempts to set up an economic closure around their lives is doomed to fail. The fantasy/genre they depend upon is always traversable once one looks at the issue from a different subject/historical position. For *Brave Orchid*, the most obvious failure is seen in her intervention into her sister Moon Orchid's marriage. In the section "At the Western Palace," *Brave Orchid* tries to reactivate her old myth of "the emperor's four wives." She insists that Moon Orchid claim her right over her husband who had left her immediately after their marriage in China over thirty years ago and settled down in America with a new wife. As expected, the whole "show" (150) arranged by *Brave Orchid* to have Moon Orchid meet with her husband turns out to be a tragedy. Not only can the husband not take Moon Orchid into his house but Moon Orchid suffers from paranoia from then on. Sau-Ling Wong rightly points out that *Brave Orchid* is in this case "self-contained" and "utterly oblivious to her environment" (Wong, "Reading" 46). Her insistence on the correctness of her own reading of the myth/legend illustrates the limitation of her personal vision. Actually, *Brave Orchid* is understandably absorbed in the myth of "the emperor's four wives." Moon Orchid's was left behind by a husband gone overseas; her situation reminds *Brave Orchid* of her own anxiety, perhaps not only before her husband sent for her from America, but even after she has joined him there. As Maxine observes, "*Brave Orchid* told her children they must help her keep their father from marrying another woman because she didn't think she could take it any better than her sister" (160). Underlying *Brave Orchid*'s attempt to "help" her sister is her anxiety about her own marriage.

Following her mother, Maxine's probing for the absolute is seen most clearly in the section "White Tigers." Marilyn Yalom suggests a reading of Fa Mu Lan's story as Maxine's "wish-fulfillment fantasy designed to counter the image of the victimized aunt" (110). Whether Maxine really takes Fa Mu Lan as her model warrior is still debatable; however, what is clear is that the Fa Mu Lan described in her dream is endowed with an absolute vision and a totalizing power, the two things Maxine wishes for in her waking life. The myth starts with Maxine's crossing from the

symbolic world of her mother's story-telling into an absolute world of dream. Or, borrowing from Lacan, she leaves a partial world of "voice" for a visual world of specular totality.<sup>6</sup> No sooner has Maxine quit her mother's "voice" of story-telling than she enters into the dream world which is marked by multiple colors (Sato 139). Through the emphasis on the visual experience in this section, the mysterious power of the old couple who adopt Maxine in her dream is manifested in their possession of a magical water gourd through which one can *see* the whole world. Moreover, the training Maxine undergoes to be a warrior consists of exercises which teach her to transcend the linguistic world of meaning deferral to an ideographic world of imagery stability. First, she is required to create the ideographic words with her body. Later, she is supposed to copy the actions of owls, bats and tigers. Then, she is trained to see "a dragon whole" (29) even though the dragon is only a creature of human imagination. Her lesson concludes when she is able to "point at the sky and make a sword appear" (33)—an accomplishment demonstrating her ability to manipulate images in the world at her will.

However, this dream vision is unfulfillable in Maxine's real life. Even the author Kingston does not feel that the fantasy tale of Fa Mu Lan manifests an ideal to be quested for. When asked why she did not put "White Tigers" at the climax of her book, Kingston dismissed the story to be a "childish myth" that she put at the beginning of the book because it is "not a climax we reach for" ("Mis-readings" 57). There are at least two reasons for Kingston to dislike the story of Fa Mu Lan. First, it features a dream for totality while the sense of totality is inextricably an illusion. Not only is the achievement of absolute vision impossible, but the search for the absolute usually leads to an intolerance of differences, an impenetrable exorcism. Secondly, Kingston does not like the image of "warrior." Her reaction to her connection with Fa Mu Lan was "very negative": "I don't feel that she's me... I wish I had not had a metaphor of a warrior person who uses weapons and goes to war" (qtd in Aubery 80). This pacifist position is reiterated in the narrator Maxine's comment: "I mustn't feel bad that I haven't done as well as the swordswoman did; after all, ... I dislike armies" (*Warrior* 49). In addition, Maxine says, "[w]hat fighting and killing I have seen have not been glorious but slum grubby.... Fights are confusing as to who has won" (51). Underlying each fight is a

desire to erase the alien, the uncontrollable, namely, the other. It is "confusing as to who has won" because it is always hard to say whether one can really win over the other or just temporarily suppress the other and then suffer from the danger of the other's resurgence.

Evidently, in contrast to her dream vision, Maxine's waking life is filled with lack, frustrations and insolvable paradoxes. She tells us immediately after her recounting of Fa Mu Lan's story: "My American life has been such a disappointment" (45). Doubly marginalized in her living world as both a woman and an ethnic minority, Maxine is desperate to prove to her parents the usefulness of raising daughters as well as to assert her presence in front of her racist boss. Speaking is important for her because she finds that the only thing in common between she and Fa Mu Lan is "the words" at their backs (53). Nonetheless, while Fa Mu Lan's words are carved into her skin and conjoined with her body, Maxine's reporting words are floating, sliding, subject to other people's readings. Her position is less totalizing. Always exploratory and fragmentary, her speaking both asserts her subject position and addresses her to the judgement of a discursive community.

This also accounts for why Maxine has to keep speaking. Unable to maintain a signifying enclosure of silence, Maxine suffers from the anxiety of losing her voice: "Insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves" (186). Moreover, once she opens her mouth and starts speaking, it is again difficult for her to hold herself back. One of the most obvious examples can be found in the episode of Maxine's "telling list." The teenager Maxine creates a list of over two hundred truths about her bad thinking and misbehavior to confess to Brave Orchid in order to "stop the pain in [her] throat" (197). What she wants to do is to hold her anxieties and concerns under control through the help of a regulating list and spoken language. However, when she starts to talk, the bursting list is soon confronted by the striking back of Brave Orchid, the "champion talker" (202). Maxine creates her "telling list" to unburden her mind of her insecurities but instead, the list continues to grow and it seems that she needs to talk more to regain her stability. This episode is particularly interesting because it reminds us of Kingston's situation in real life. Deeply engaged in the discursive community built around her book, Kingston could have to spend her life-time clarifying, defending,



and thus re-writing the significance of her writings after the publication of *The Woman Warrior*.

Given the fact that a voice leads to more voices, perhaps the only way for the narrator Maxine to escape from the dialogical complications of the world of voice is to self-impose an exile from her subject position of uncertainty. Fa Mu Lan, as an example, leaves her village to accept tutoring from the mysterious old couple in order to gain the supernatural power of a warrior. Facing her husband's voyage overseas and her children's death, the young Brave Orchid decides to leave her family to become an exorcistic midwife in a medical school. Similarly, Maxine has to leave her mother as well as her Chinese community in order to live "ghost-free" (108). Here, exile implies freedom from her/his subject position in the discursive tension, as well as an assimilation into an established economic/conceptual/discursive system. In other words, exile is a giving-away of one's exploratory subjectivity in exchange for a temporary illusory stability and safety, by making oneself an object of another's desire and manipulation. Taken at the generic level, it is to categorize oneself into a single established genre rather than invent one's individual genre in reading/interpretation. Lacking the courage required for entry into a discursive community, this self-imposed exile features a spirit of escapism, a relinquishment of one's individual agency.

Therefore, although this form of escapism, self-relinquishment and self-abstention from community is a way to resolve one's sense of uncertainty temporarily, it is not advocated in *The Woman Warrior*. Actually, an exile could be productive only when it is followed by a return to the community, that is, when the person returning from exile can bring something new into her/his original community and re-map it in one way or another. The magic power of Fa Mu Lan would count for nothing if she could not avenge her family and community. After becoming a female doctor, Brave Orchid was welcomed home as an empowered figure expected to make a difference in her living world. Perhaps the most obvious example is in the story of Ts'ai Yen: during her twelve-year-stay in exile, she produces songs and poetry that serve to bridge the communication gap between the barbarian and the Chinese after her return to China.

A similar accomplishment might also be expected from the narrator Maxine. The purpose of her assuming an American



identity must not be to reinforce Brave Orchid's belief in cultural-binarism. Rather, it must be to introduce a new way to look at her Chinese parentage. From a child who fears "the size of the world" (99) and has to banish the discontinuous and the incomprehensible from her perception, Maxine has to learn to make her mind large, "as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes" (29). A similar idea was developed by Kingston in an interview:

I have learned that writing does not make ghosts go away. I wanted to record, to find words for, the "ghosts," ... They are not concrete; they are beautiful and powerful. But they don't have a solidity that we can pass around from one to another. I wanted to give them a substance that goes beyond me. (Rabinowitz 178)

Since it is always a losing fight to try to impose silence through writing and speaking, it is better to leave one's writings/stories open to different genres of reading. Writing/speaking in this sense is not necessarily an exorcistic effort for through it, one not only asserts her/himself in an intervention into a discursive community but also continuously yields ground to her/his readers. As an individual practice, writing/speaking provides a way for a person to break out of any imaginary closure of signification by bringing the personal, the uncategorized, the unspeakable as well as the ghost-like into symbolic circulation.

An individual practice originating from Kingston's personal life experiences, *The Woman Warrior* is revolutionary because of its openness in both structure and content. Kingston tells her interviewer, "I am always figuring out how the lone person forms a community" (Rabinowitz 185). Writing with a community in her mind, she plays out how individuals interact with a discursive world: how they traverse the boundaries defined by others, how they appropriate cultural objects to their use, invent new genres, create new meanings, but also subject their own discourses to other people's reading and writing. Kingston's community is a community in constant change. It is a community of affinity and dialogue, not of homogeneity. The taken-for-grantedness is confronted with the personal. The history is opened up by an individual's memory. In writing *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston has tactfully formed a community of endless dialogues.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A survey on the courses and contexts in which *The Woman Warrior* is taught and circulated is done by Shirley Geok-lin Lim ed., *Approaches to Teaching Kingston's The Woman Warrior* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1991), 8-9. For the anthologization of sections from *The Woman Warrior*, see Lim, 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> See Thomas Beebee, "Introduction: Why Genre" and "Theoretical Postlude: The Ideology of Genre," *The Ideology of Genre: A Comparative Study of Generic Instability* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State U P, 1994), 1-29 and 249-283.

<sup>3</sup> Beebee: "No genre, no power" (12).

<sup>4</sup> According to Bakhtin, unlike other genres, novel is a "genre-in-the-making," a "genre" of "heteroglossia" and incompleteness in which a "dialogue of languages" is staged (365) and where different genres coexist, interact, and are parodied (5). See M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> This is obvious in the "torturing scene" at the beginning of "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," in which Maxine forces another silent Chinese girl (her double) to talk. Maxine spells out her own anxiety of not being able to talk when she tells her victim: "If you don't talk, you can't have a personality" (180).

<sup>6</sup> The Lacanian specular world is a world of image (picture) that closes upon itself and features an illusion of completeness/ totality in the symbolic. See Lacan, "What is a Picture," *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 105-119.

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## Translation as Metaphor in Hildesheimer's *Marbot Eine Biographie*

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Julia L. Abramson

On February 22, 1980, in the literary supplement of the Hamburg weekly *Die Zeit*, Wolfgang Hildesheimer published an article describing a character whose biography was to appear the following year. As if to prevent confusion regarding *Marbot Eine Biographie*, the article's captions give to understand that the text to be published is not a historical treatise, but rather a historical novel, a "gefälschte ... Biographie" (*Die Wahrheit* 42). Another rubric refers to Hildesheimer's proclivity for "skurrile Fiktionen" (43) and announces that here as elsewhere in his work, "Wirklichkeit ist absurd, Wahrheit ein Spiel" (43).

The subject of this falsified biography, Sir Andrew Marbot, was born in England in 1801 and committed suicide in Urbino, Italy in 1830. As a boy, he preferred the company of his refined mother and maternal grandfather over that of his father, who was interested only in hunting and sports. Though he did not kill his father, Marbot pursued a passionate affair with his mother. As an adult, his energies were channelled either into this romance or into the pursuit of his second love, the analysis of paintings. In the course of two European Grand Tours, which doubled as periods of self-imposed exile from England and his mother, he encountered such luminaries as Goethe, Byron, Turner, Delacroix and Schopenhauer. Marbot mulled over the works of these and other Romantic-era artists and intellectuals, finding in them a reflection of himself or matter for dispute. Marbot himself invented a singular method of understanding paintings. Realizing that the sublimation of his transgressive love for his mother fueled his own analytical studies, Marbot searched to understand paintings through the psychology of their creators.

While the *Zeit* article may have stimulated interest in the book to come, it also warned readers that *Marbot Eine Biographie* concerns a fictional character thrust into a historical world. It may be more suitable to speak of the character Marbot's insertion into the real world, rather than into a historical world, since the latter suggests a vision of the real world but only in a former time.



Although the elements of the text directly concerning Marbot and Marbot scholarship are apocryphal, these details are nonetheless realistic. That in the 1820s there lived an innovative art-historian like Marbot is possible. Hegel (1770-1831), Goethe (1749-1832) and Friedrich von Schlegel (1772-1829) contributed to the historicizing and theorizing of art, that is, to the creation of today's discipline of art history. All three died within two years of Andrew Marbot's own death. Furthermore, Karl Friedrich von Rumohr (1785-1843), whose *Italienische Forschungen* of 1827 was innovative for its attempt at objectivity and consistency in the analysis of paintings (Kultermann 88), appears as an influential figure to Marbot in the realm of gastronomy as well as art history. In Marbot's biography, the factual and the fictional are admixed to tease a reader's credulity and strain his erudition to the point that more than one prominent reader was deceived, for a time, into believing this novel to be a factual historical biography.

Marbot's story is related by an anonymous first-person narrator, who is also Marbot's supposed biographer. The narrator cites manuscript sources such as letters and journals, as well as another biography and various monographs on his subject. This narrator has an advantage over earlier scholars. Twentieth-century technology in the form of quartz lamps has enabled the narrator to consult Marbot's most personal journal entries: marginal notes previously inked over to avoid scandal and hitherto illegible (Marbot 181). This discovery is important, as Marbot wrote of his incestuous desires and his views on the idea of sin and his society's taboos only in the margins of his notebooks. The conclusions the narrator draws from these newly-deciphered sources make his study different and more accurate, he tells us, than earlier ones.

In 1982, Ina Schabert distinguished between conventional biography and the psychobiography by stating that the first "keeps... close... to aspects of factual evidence," whereas "psychohistory resembles the novel in its ability to derive long sequences of inner events from single items of biographical information" (9). The Marbot narrator focusses in a novelistic fashion on patterns of behavior and events which in his estimation reveal the deeper truth of his subject's life. Based on Schabert's definition, the method of the Marbot narrator makes his text fit the description of a psychobiography. Since *Marbot Eine Biographie* is a novel, it is more precisely described as a fictive psychobiography.

As the psychobiographical approach suggests and as the narrator states several times, he seeks to present the *key* to Marbot's psychology. However, at the very end of the text, the narrator articulates, or rather finally reveals, a second purpose. In the closing chapter, the narrator repeats that Marbot's journals are about to be published in a critical edition (318), an event to which he has already alluded (259). Then, at the end of this last chapter, he further declares that the forthcoming edition will omit the intimate, subversive, marginal notes which provide the key to understanding Marbot's personality. "Die verräterischen Randnotizen bleiben in der Neuausgabe ausgespart, denn da sie scheinbar zufällig verteilt sind, hätten sie den Rhythmus der deduktiven Rede zerstört" (317-8). While earlier the notes were omitted for reasons of decency, they will be absent from the forthcoming edition in order to maintain style. The liminal notes are often written backwards or contain obscure references. To be comprehensible, they require heavy glossing and this would disrupt the linear flow of narrative. It is therefore the role of this biography, says the narrator, to instruct the future reader of the source text in the forthcoming edition, so that he will be equipped to understand it despite its incompleteness (317). The narrator offers this biography as a prophylactic, to prevent a misconception of historical truth, embodied in the primary source documents. Taken together, the two stated goals of this biography form a peculiar syllogism. The biographer claims for his work unmediated access to historical truth, that is, an originary knowledge relative to what will become known as *the* primary-source documents. At the same time, no one but the biographer has access to these documents. Therefore the biography remains the unique guarantor of its own authority. This is at best a highly suspicious, potentially self-undermining stance.

The strange logic of this proposition, like the novel's historical frame and its carefully announced publication, call attention to the constructedness of *Marbot Eine Biographie*. Taking this cue to look at the manner of telling as well as the matter of the story being told, I will turn to an analysis of one theme, the practice of translation, as a means of exploring the related notions of authority and authenticity which inform this text on many levels.

The situation pertaining to languages in *Marbot* is complex. Andrew Marbot spent his youth in the English countryside, yet

thanks to his Dutch Jesuit tutor and to his well-travelled mother, he is not provincial. Marbot speaks German, Italian and French, travels extensively and habitually corresponds in German and Italian as well as in English. He even exchanges letters in ancient Greek with Thomas de Quincey (47). One may judge of Marbot's command of Greek by de Quincey's:

...my command of that language was so great, that I not only composed Greek verses in lyric metres, but could converse in Greek fluently and without embarrassment—an accomplishment which... was owing to the practice of daily reading off the newspaper into the best Greek I could furnish *extempore*: for the necessity of ransacking my memory and invention, for all sorts and combinations of periphrastic expressions, as equivalents for modern ideas, images, relations of things, &c. gave me a compass of diction which would never have been called out by a dull translation of moral essays, &c. (Quincey 6-7)

In his journal, Marbot also makes notes in Latin. This may have been usual for a well-educated Englishman of aristocratic family in the early nineteenth century. However, polylingualism is by no means taken for granted in this twentieth-century novel.

The language situation lived by the character Marbot leads to an equally complicated narrative situation in his biography. The narrator is germanophone. However, the narrator's source materials (letters, journals, earlier scholarly work) are in several languages. Given the variety of his materials, the narrator could have rendered his text homogeneous by translating all citations into German. This choice would have been justified by the fact that German is the one language aside from English which Marbot spoke perfectly. Alternatively, given the narrator's grasp of English, he could have adopted that language for greater fidelity to his subject. English, after all, is Marbot's native language and the one which dominates his writings on art. In fact, the narrator instead has produced a heterogeneous, polyglot text. The German-language narrative is liberally peppered with words, phrases and occasionally whole sentences and paragraphs in five other languages, particularly English. These citations are often accompanied by complete or partial translations into German.

This heteroglossia has engendered criticism. The poet Helmut Heissenbüttel opines that the translations and citations in various

languages make reading tiresome. Heissenbüttel refers disparagingly to the numerous English quotations as being the result of a pedantic *Manie* on the part of the author ("Die Puppe" 305). Admittedly, for this reader as well, the language changes create a halting impression. In the following passage, for instance, the narrator cites Marbot's description of an opiated de Quincey. Within the narrator's translation of Marbot's notes, he inserts citations of the English-language source:

...Es schien mir, als begeistere er sich selbst an seinem unheimlichen Selbstgespräch (sinister soliloquy). Hin und wieder ging er zur Tür und rief "Margaret dear!" oder "My dear Peggy!," als wolle er seine Frau an diesen Monologen teilhaben lassen, aber sie kam nicht.... Es war mir nicht wohl bei diesem Schauspiel, und doch war es eine Szene, die nur ein Mann von Bildung und Geist zu spielen vermag, wenn auch dieser Geist zerrüttet (deranged) war. (66)

Ulrich Weisstein asserts that the parenthetical citations of an original text, however bulky and repetitive, function to acknowledge the problem of rendering nuances of expression accurately. Thus the original-language citations authenticate the fictive biography, making it scholarly (25). The degree of attention paid to the question of translation and its overt acknowledgement in the text are indeed important components of the historical frame in *Marbot*. To cite but one example, the biographer uses the term "eligible," in English, then notes that "hier fehlt ein deutsches Wort" (35): he knows no satisfactorily equivalent term in German. This remark belies the narrator's search for accuracy in the description and exploitation of his source material, which, because foreign, he acknowledges as by definition unfamiliar. Marbot was of another time, another place and another language than the narrator. Therefore, by inserting bits of Marbot's English text into his German translations, the narrator restores to Marbot at least some of his true voice. However, the presence of translation as a theme and as a narrative activity is too preoccupying merely to fulfill an authenticating function. The frequent recourse to English and occasionally to other languages foreign to German, while it reveals a positive concern with accuracy, also conveys a distrust that the act of translation is sufficient to render the nuances of two different languages.



A concern for accuracy in translation distinguishes Marbot as much as his biographer. As the narrator points out, Marbot's diaries contain phrases in other languages than his native English, as well as queries regarding the lack of precise equivalents between languages. Marbot notes in describing Mantegna's *La famiglia del Marchese Ludovico* that

...Der einzige Mann in Bewegung ist der heraneilende Sekretär, zu dem sich der Herzog zurückneigt, um ihm etwas ins Ohr zu schweigen.

Der letzte Nebensatz ist deutsch geschrieben, und unten auf der Seite steht als Seitengedanke die rhetorische Frage: "Why do we not have a word for the verb 'Schweigen?'" (224-5)

The import of this passage is that the Duke beckoned the secretary to him in order to *whisper* something in the secretary's ear. However, *whisper* more precisely corresponds to the verbs *flüstern* or *wispern*. The term *schweigen* literally means to fall silent, making the Duke's projected action complex. The Duke will intone without noise, or speak without speaking, as it were; perhaps he may do so with stealth or secrecy. As Marbot notes, causing the narrator and thus the reader to do the same, it is difficult to translate the verb *schweigen*, as it is poetically used here, into English without affectation or circumlocution. This passage demonstrates that it is Marbot's polylingualism which allows him to consider questions relating to translation. At the same time, during his travels in France, Germany and Italy, his ability to speak several languages obviates the need for translation. Marbot switches language modes according to location and company, circumventing translation and avoiding imprecise linguistic equivalency. This implies that polylingualism allows Marbot an authentic, complete contact.

The question of translation, brought to the fore by the protagonist's polylingualism and by the practice of the ever-cautious narrator, is also significant on the level of reception, which in the case of *Marbot* includes real-world translation. The polylingual aspects of *Marbot* multiply the hurdles which any translator must overcome, since the meaning of passages on the subject of language in English, French or Greek depends on their being set off by the German narrative. These juxtapositions are literally lost in translation, as is, therefore, much of a thematic stratum. For instance, in Patricia Crampton's English-language



translation, when the narrator describes Andrew's father as eligible to be married (cited above), his further observation that "hier fehlt ein deutsches Wort" necessarily has been edited out. Also logically missing from Crampton's translation are the numerous citations of Marbot's English notes, inserted by the narrator into his germanized text. The following passage illustrates this reduction. It is from a letter Marbot wrote to his mother, describing a visit with Goethe:

Er bat mich, ihm vorzulesen. Ich tat es und fühlte mich dabei beobachtet von einem Richter, unfehlbar wie Gott und ebenso unmenschlich (...felt myself observed by a judge as infallible as God, and as inhuman). (13)

In the English-language translation, this is stripped down:

[H]e asked me to read aloud to him. I did so and felt myself observed by a judge as infallible as God, and as inhuman. (6)

In the German text, every juxtaposition of languages created by the parenthetical insertions reminds the reader that he is removed from the documents in question. In the English-language translation, the diminution of this passage and of countless others like it weakens the anglophone reader's awareness of translation as a task performed by the narrator and as a force which shapes the narrative. These reductions gradually efface the consciousness of version as a theme. Given the references in *Marbot* to western-European "high" culture, as lived by an Englishman, in particular, it is not surprising that the only translations of the book to date are in English and in French. It is ironic that the non-germanophone reader most attuned to the historical and cultural references in the text, possibly an anglophone reader educated within the tradition to which *Marbot* refers, will, if he must read or chooses to read only in English, unknowingly confront a version of the text in which the theme of translation has been rendered imperceptible.

Marbot's references to the lack of precise equivalents between languages, the narrator's refusal to sacrifice the possibility of referring to sources in their many original languages and the resultant difficulty this polylingualism creates for a real translation of the novel suggest that the act of translation inevitably betrays meaning. Marbot's and the narrator's fastidiousness in

changing languages in order to preserve disjunctions, as opposed to de-articulating them through translation, suggests that they value what they consider to be immutable. According to this logic of immutability, communication ideally would take place without the need of translation and the fracturing and betrayal it entails. Yet the cosmopolitan culture which the character Marbot exemplifies has already surpassed the stage of monolingualism, represented by Marbot's narrow-minded father. To achieve a perfect comprehension of the immutable, polylingualism *ad infinitum* is the other logical extreme. If one could switch at will from language to language, one could appreciate every subtle nuance with the understanding that comes of cultural and linguistic familiarity.

However, infinite heteroglossia can only be an ideal. Polylingualism, as practiced by Marbot, represents a compromise. Marbot's community of understanding is enlarged at least through the knowledge of a few languages, since it cannot be enlarged infinitely. Knowing a few languages is sufficient to give him a sense of the immutable. The text of *Marbot* reflects this compromise which, in another sense, is also a refusal to compromise. As an agglomerate of languages, the text preserves that which is distinct or idiosyncratic to each one. But the agglomerate text is of necessity somewhat clumsy, disenfranchised from that right of a good narrative to flow seamlessly. Similarly, insofar as Marbot is a cosmopolite, it is notable that he has achieved cultural flexibility at a price. By virtue of his linguistic ability, i.e., his capacity to translate himself across borders at least within the confines of Western Europe, Marbot, like most of the artistic and intellectual company he keeps, can make himself "at home" in many places. He is an intrepid traveler with a sense of the larger world, and a sophistication that transcends national perspective. Any hints of cultural relativism are absent from Marbot's writings. At the same time, Marbot is in exile from his native England. Given his cosmopolitan sophistication as much as his transgressive secret, he is also excommunicated from belonging anywhere in a local fashion.

Hildesheimer's *Marbot Eine Biographie* participates in the tradition of the literary mystification, in that it deceptively imitates that which inspires it, then laughingly draws notice to itself as being in the act of imitation. The literary mystification thus questions what is specific to the work being imitated as opposed to its imitation, and, through demystification, didactically involves the reader in

this query. In this case, we are asked what distinguishes scholarship from learned fancy. As it appears in *Marbot*, the act of translation may be understood as the attempt to render one voice in another without betrayal. Thus described, translation is a metaphor for historiography, of which biography is one instance: historiography seeks to unearth voices of the past, but also to make them intelligible in the present time. In *Marbot*, translation is ubiquitous through the narrator's inclusion of parenthetical citations of source. These same citations are constantly shown to be less desirable than letting the historical voice speak for itself. This tension points to the fallibility in the enterprise of understanding the past. The narrator's superior knowledge, relative to his scholarly predecessors, results from the contingency of living in the twentieth century and being able to use a quartz lamp to reveal his sources, plainly indicating the provisional nature of what is referred to as knowledge.

Within the body of Hildesheimer's writing, this literary mystification is not without precedent. For example, Hildesheimer's first novel, *Paradies der falschen Vögel*, concerns an obscure Balkan nation, recently ravaged by a great war, which uses its newly-recovered economic prosperity to restore its cultural identity as well. In *Paradies*, a painter is hired by the government to create a number of old works—to expeditiously forge a cultural patrimony for the nation. In the process, the painter must first disguise, then actually loses his identity. This short novel may be read as a fable about post-World War II Germany during the *Wirtschaftswunder*, or Economic Miracle. In *Marbot*, the historical setting, and the emphasis on translation, in particular the germanophone, anglophone and francophone triangle, evoke the memory of a community in which the esthetic and the intellectual have a living force and provide a standard for living and dying. This particular cultural confluence may also suggest another community, the enforced internationalism of the triple occupation of West Berlin during the Cold War era, toward the end of which this book was written. As an instance of fiction written at the end of the present century, what does *Marbot* portend? Though its narrative limps at times, this novel finds liberation through its exploration of the cumulus of history. Liberation for this fictive psychobiography is to be found neither in the crossing of generic boundaries, given the idea of transgression connoted in that phrase, nor in an escapist

nostalgia for the past. Rather, the life of this work resides in its subtle, even sly, mode of generic innovation and, thanks to the self-consciousness of its evocation of the past, in its reflective acknowledgement of the present.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Hildesheimer, "Die Wahrheit der Unwahrheit," *Die Zeit* Feuilleton 9 (22 February 1980): 42-3. The first edition of *Marbot Eine Biographie* followed in 1981 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag).

<sup>2</sup> Dorrit Cohn and Theodore Ziolkowski point out that this feature makes *Marbot* unique among historical or biographical novels. Cohn, "Breaking the Code of Fictional Biography" in *Traditions of Experiment from the Enlightenment to the Present*, eds. Nancy Kaiser and David Wellbery (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992): 303; and Ziolkowski, *Varieties of Literary Thematics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 137.

<sup>3</sup> During the preparation of his novel, Hildesheimer occasionally cited Sir Andrew Marbot in radio addresses and essays, thus working him into the consciousness of the present time. See, for example, the epigraph to Hanjo Kesting's "Das Ende der Fiktion: Gespräch mit Wolfgang Hildesheimer," transcribed in *Dichter ohne Vaterland* (Berlin/Bonn: Verlag J.H.W. Dietz, 1982): 52. This interview was first aired on Norddeutsche Rundfunk, 3. Programm (5 April 1977).

<sup>4</sup> This is noted as well by Ulrich Weisstein, who writes that on the whole, "the difference between real and imaginary characters is made transparent insofar as it can be gauged from their presence in or absence from the *index nominum*." From Weisstein's "Wolfgang Hildesheimer's *Marbot*: Fictional Biography and Treatise on Comparative Literature," *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 32 (1983): 24. The names of members of Marbot's family, as well as those of other Marbot scholars, are conspicuously absent from the index of names at the end of *Marbot Eine Biographie*.

<sup>5</sup> See Patricia Stanley, *The Realm of Possibilities* (Maryland: University Press of America, 1988), xiv note 7.

<sup>6</sup> Here I use the term narrator to indicate the anonymous though highly opinionated character imputed behind the first-person narrative voice. I use this term with the understanding that the narrator is the character responsible for the research and the inclusion of detail, within the novel called *Marbot Eine Biographie*. As *Marbot* is a fictive biography, I shall also use the term biographer to mean the character of the biographer, i.e. the narrator.

<sup>7</sup> See pages 10, 19, 99 and 259 for specific references.



<sup>8</sup> In *W.H. and His Critics*, Stanley employs this phrase in her call for poststructuralist and postmodernist, rather than biographical, studies of Hildesheimer's work, advocating a new emphasis on "manner" as well as "matter." The present study claims no affiliation with a theory of the postmodern, though its focus on "manner" as well as "matter" bespeaks its poststructuralist perspective. Matter and manner are also discussed in Cohn, Dorrit. "Breaking the Code of Fictional Biography." *Traditions of Experiment from the Enlightenment to the Present*. Eds. Nancy Kaiser and David Wellbery. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> This passage would have appeared on page 21 of Patricia Crampton's translation, *Marbot A Biography* (New York: George Braziller, 1983). A British translation was published in the same year: *Marbot*, trans. Marion Faber (London: Dent, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> *Sir Andrew Marbot*, trans. Martin Kaltenecker (Paris: J. C. Lattès, 1984). Ironically, *Sir Andrew Marbot* is also the title borne by the 1888 biography of Marbot written by Frederic Hadley-Chase, and to which the *Marbot* narrator refers. The narrator points out on several occasions that the 1888 biography was gravely flawed!

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# Literary Criticism after the Revolution, or How to Read a Polemical Postmodern Literary Text

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*Janet Sarbanes*

My paper will formulate a model for reading literary texts written either at the inception or as a continuation of the politics of subjectivity that came into existence in the United States in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, a politics organized around racial, gender and sexual identities to advocate rights, representation and, in some instances, revolution. Like many literary texts and theories of language of the postmodern era, these texts treat politics and language as inextricably intertwined, though their primary aim is not so much to dismantle the dominant discourse as to generate "minor" political subjectivities.

From a poststructuralist critical perspective, these texts often appear unreadable because they approach the intersection of politics, identity and textuality differently than other literary—or for that matter, philosophical—texts. The language of these texts is the language of force, polemic and struggle, rather than the *langue* of domination, structure and empire. It is also the language of the body, not as text, but as vehicle for transforming individual subjectivity into group subjectivity. With their construction of the felt or lived body as the vital link between language and materiality, individual and collective, politics and literature, these writers create a discourse of the other-as-other which not merely subverts but in certain instances defies the sociolinguistic rules of the dominant discourse.

The "revolution" I am "reading after" must also refer to the revolution in our understanding of subjectivity wrought by the poststructuralists, whose critique of the Western metaphysical tradition connected politics, philosophy and literature in unprecedented ways. Vincent Pecora summarizes the subversive legacy of poststructuralism in terms of its critique of essentialism, the argument that stable identities are in effect linguistic fictions or historical constructions; its critique of representation, the insistence that language is not neutral or fixed but slanted and unstable; and its critique of utilitarianism and instrumental thinking (64).

He suggests, however, that despite its obvious relevance to oppositional political discourses concerning issues of race, gender and sexuality, post-structuralism itself cannot be considered an oppositional political discourse.

Pecora contends that the poststructuralist critique of "the West" stepped in to fill the political vacuum left behind in the nineteen-fifties by Marxism's failure to deal with questions of empire and third-world revolution. It is this circumstance, Pecora maintains, that accounts for the "political aura" which has surrounded poststructuralism since its inception. His argument suggests that if there had been a competing materialist, anti-imperialist discourse at that particular historical moment, poststructuralism might not have inherited the Marxist mantle of political engagement—or at least, it would have had to work a little harder for it.

Is poststructuralism *structurally* incapable of generating a material politics or is this merely a side-effect of its original incarnation as a "philosophical response to philosophical problems" (Pecora 75)? Pecora points out that poststructuralism's project of "dismantling Western habits of thought from the inside out" (60), has ironically precluded its consideration of any discourse other than Western philosophy. In the same vein, it is my contention that poststructuralism—particularly deconstruction—despite its emphasis on the unknowability of language and despite its subversive trafficking of *différance*, has paradoxically followed the trajectory of Western idealism in upholding the mind/body split in its critique of the subject. It is the failure to adequately theorize the body in relation to subjectivity that accounts for the peculiar apoliticism of such a seemingly revolutionary theoretical practice.

My assertion that poststructuralist thought has avoided theorizing the body may come as a surprise to anyone acquainted with the work of Michel Foucault, but I would argue that Foucault essentially eluded the debate over subjectivity when he moved to "dispense with the constituent subject, and to get rid of the subject itself... to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework" (Foucault 117). To replace the subject with the socio-historical constitution of the subject is not to *materialize* and *politicize* the metaphorical subject, but to *embody* hegemonic practices *in* the subject. The subject thus comes to occupy the position traditionally assigned to the body by

idealist philosophers from Plato to Kant, i.e. the position of object. Foucault has theorized the body as object and equated it with the (death of the) subject.

In his critique of poststructuralism, Perry Anderson makes the argument that "the only cognitive bases for structures of knowledge are the subjects who produce and are in turn shaped by them" (qtd. in Pecora 70). Derrida's and Foucault's failure to deconstruct the mind/body split necessarily results in an inadequate theorization of the tension between subject and structure because they cannot really envision a resistant subjectivity. Certainly the humanist subject, the avatar of Western imperialism, comes apart in language and is pulled apart by rhetoric; deconstructed, it loses its illusionary unity and originary power and collapses back into the system that produces it. But is that the end of subjectivity?

For the writers I consider here, Kathy Acker and Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones, it is only the beginning and it is necessarily the beginning of any meaningful criticism of their work as well. Acker and Baraka/Jones extend the critique of the unified subject to encompass the mind/body split, treating the deconstruction of this opposition not merely as a function of language but as an ontological principle. For these writers, subjectivity is formed through interaction with the felt body, the body as it is lived, as it contributes to thought—the body-subject, not the body-object. Their goal in representing this subjectivity is to construct a particularized body politic—a female body politic and black body politic, respectively—to mediate between subject and structure, preventing the collapse of subject into structure by creating a locus of resistance in between.

How is this felt body, this body-subject, produced? Emmanuel Levinas suggests that it is called forth in speech: until the body-subject speaks it can only be understood by the other as an "insensate body-thing" (Stone 42). Marked by the particulars of race and gender, the black man and the white woman, when juxtaposed to the universal subject of metaphysics, are prevented from speaking and forcibly equated with the untranscendent, the "insensate body-thing." In order to speak at all, they must in turn force their speech upon a hostile other, insisting upon their own body-subjectivity.

In other words, they must deliver a polemic. Speaking from within an always already deconstructed mind/body split, they

must challenge the separation of language from materiality, pronouncing those words which come too close to the experience of the lived body and are suppressed as "obscene." Conversely, they must highlight the materiality of language through experimental textual practices, linking their metaphysical critique to stylistic innovation. Their characters must function as subjects of collective enunciation, rather than as individuals, if they are to create a particularized body politic, a locus from which the body-subject may speak freely. This is to say, they must aspire to a kind of "hyperrealism" which does not allow language to function as a closed system but requires that it be open to its other, the body-subject.

Any critic working on Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka is faced from the outset with the absence of an even nominally unified subject. Until 1967, he published as Leroi Jones and, after 1967, as Imamu (Spiritual Leader) Amiri Baraka (Blessed Prince). Most critics choose one or the other name in the interest of clarity and in doing so tend to construct Baraka/Jones as an evolving subject—evolving from hypocritical literary "whiteness" to sincere revolutionary "blackness"—rather than as a subjectivity constituted by oppositions, tensions, confrontations, sudden breaks and inextricable ties. By representing Baraka/Jones with a slash construction, I hope to allow one part of his body of work to exist in concert and in contradiction with the other, without imposing an overarching evolutionary—or indeed, revolutionary—narrative on the whole.

Baraka/Jones's literary career began with his association with the Beat poets in Greenwich Village from 1961 to 1965. As he explained at the time: "the reason I always associate with the people thought of as beats is that they're outside the mainstream of American vulgarity" (Stone 42). Like Allen Ginsburg and William Burroughs, Baraka/Jones sought in his early writing to counter the vulgarity of nineteen-fifties conformism with a certain non-conformist vulgarity. He stipulates in a later interview, however, that even in his Beat period, his focus was always on "blackness": "The writing from the earliest published work is always a concern with the identity of black—my identity of black and what is blackness and just the whole style of being black people." (Baraka/Jones qtd. in Hudson 20).



"Hymn for Lanie Poo," published in 1961, attacks the hypocrisy of a black community which misidentifies with "whiteness" and seeks to expel the other, which is "blackness":

my sister is a school teacher  
 my sister took ballet lessons  
 my sister has a fine figure: never diets  
 my sister doesn't like to teach in Newark  
     because there are too many colored  
     in her classes  
 my sister hates loud shades  
 my sister's boy friend is a faggot music  
 teacher  
     who digs Tschaikovsky  
 my sister digs Tschaikovsky also  
 it is because of this similarity of interests  
 that they will probably get married.  
     Smiling & glad/in  
     the huge & loveless  
     white-anglo sun/of  
     benevolent step  
     mother America. (10)

The speaker describes his sister as being both mentally and physically schooled in whiteness: she takes ballet lessons, she doesn't diet—but the implication is she would if she had to, she "digs" Tschaikovsky. She is not only well-schooled in whiteness, she is also a schoolteacher, teaching an inferredly Eurocentric curriculum to "coloreds" in Newark, object-things with whom she does not identify.

At the same time Baraka/Jones makes it clear that generating an African-American consciousness requires more than simply replacing Eurocentrism with Afrocentrism. The speaker's ironic description of his typical week as an African-American man underscores the fact that the conflict between European and African culture is, in fact, constitutive of African-American identity:

Monday, I spent most of the day hunting.  
 Knocked off about six, gulped down a couple of monkey forskins, then took in a flick. Got to bed early.

Tuesday, same thing all day. (Caught a mangy lioness with one tit.) Ate.  
 Watched television for awhile. Read the paper, then hit the sack. (6)

Though in his "Beat" period, Baraka/Jones can be seen to critique the black bourgeoisie's schizophrenic adherence to Eurocentric values, he stops short of attempting to transform the black body-object into a body-subject. While concerned with black identity, his work from this period is very "beat" in its sense of despair and alienation. It is interesting, however—particularly in light of Baraka/Jones's use of the epithet "faggot" here—to note that two of his plays from this period, *The Baptism* and *The Toilet*, employ the figure of the gay male to critique social conformism and the denigration of the body, themes he later explores in a specifically African-American context. In *The Baptism* this parallel is particularly strong; the character of the Homosexual is martyred for challenging the mind/body split perpetuated and exploited by the Church:

The pride of life is life. And flesh must make its move. I am the sinister lover of love. The mysterious villain of thought. I love my mind, my asshole too. I love all things. As they are issued from you know who. God. God. God. God. Go-od. The great insouciant dilettante. My lovers, priests, immolated queers, how many other worlds are there, less happy, less sorrowful than ours? (15)

Though in *The Baptism* the gay man is considered the champion of body-subjectivity, Baraka later comes to associate homosexuality almost exclusively with a certain literariness divorced from material concerns. The body-subjectivity which in his Beat period Baraka/Jones attributes to the homosexual he later situates in African-American culture, particularly in the blues and jazz. He says of the blues: "The blues was conceived by freedmen and ex-slaves—if not as the result of a personal or intellectual experience, at least as an emotional confirmation of, and reaction to, the way in which most Negroes were still forced to exist in the United States" ("Swing " 33). Blues constitutes for Baraka/Jones a shared body-subjectivity, "autonomous and inviolable" by whites be-

cause tied to the "peculiar social, cultural, economic, and emotional experience of a black man in America" (37).

It is only with the blues' mutation into jazz that this shared body-subjectivity speaks to whites; blues always remains for Baraka/Jones an "ethno-historic rite as basic as blood" (ibid.). By contrast, Baraka/Jones maintains, jazz was "a music capable of reflecting not only the Negro and a black America but a white America as well" (38). This was the case because jazz "offered such a profound reflection of America that it could attract white Americans to want to play it or listen to it for exactly that reason" (38). Baraka/Jones cautions, however, that "the reaction of young white musicians to jazz was not always connected to an understanding of the Negro," since jazz was not as directly tied to the social, cultural, economic and emotional experience of black Americans as was the blues.

One could describe the civil rights movement from the nineteen-fifties up until the mid-sixties in terms analogous to those Baraka/Jones uses to describe jazz, as offering such a profound reflection of America that it could attract white Americans to want to play along. Using the African-American experience of oppression as the foundation for a discourse on universal equality, Martin Luther King, Jr., for instance, could put forth his vision of a just America to the nation as a whole (Chafe 135). One would have to note as well that black Americans' particular experience of oppression continued and continues outside the courts and in the streets on the more fundamental level of body-subjectivity, a specific experience the intensity of which a universalized civil rights discourse could not convey. Hence the turn to polemic in African-American political discourse in general in the late sixties, and in Baraka/Jones's writing in particular, a *return* to a body-subjectivity that would now be *made heard*.

Thus in 1968, at the height of what is termed his black nationalist period, Baraka/Jones publishes "Jazz and the White Critic," which takes the white critic to task for complaining of "bad taste" in jazz and in the blues. Baraka/Jones retorts: "'bad taste' was kept extant in the music, blues or jazz, because the Negroes who were responsible for the best of the music were always aware of their identities as black Americans and really did not, themselves, desire to become vague, featureless, Americans" (180). In "Black

Art" he calls for "live words of the hip world live flesh & coursing blood. Hearts Brains Souls splintering fire" (219). He concludes:

We want a black poem. And a  
Black World.  
Let the world be a Black Poem  
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem  
Silently  
or LOUD. (220)

Any reading of Baraka/Jones's polemical black nationalist texts requires the awareness of his commitment to creating a black body politic or political consciousness. It is necessary as well to understand the complex critique of subjectivity manifested in his deceptively simple polemical style. The writing of this period both is and is not open to the white other: Baraka/Jones is constructing a polemical "otherness" which makes itself heard without asking for understanding. This polemical otherness manipulates its own body-objectivity, calling up the stereotypes whites *do* possess only to exceed these stereotypes with a body-subjectivity that is inviolable—less violable, in effect, than the body-object. Formed in relation to the stereotype, this otherness registers not merely as body-subjectivity, but as a marked body-subjectivity, a *black* body-subjectivity.

You would be better off if you'd at least admit that you think women aren't human and men are. You believe that women are wet washcloths you can use to wash the grime off different parts of your body or to fling into the face of another person (a male). Every time I talk to one of you, I feel like I'm taking layers of my own epidermis, which are layers of still freshly bloody scar tissue, black brown and red, and tearing each one of them off so more and more of my blood shoots into your face. This is what writing is to me a woman. (Acker *Empire* 209)

Like Baraka/Jones, Kathy Acker takes on the mind/body split in order to generate a viable political subjectivity—in her case, for women. The extraordinary language that results from the dissolution of this particular dichotomy has garnered Acker's writing the label "experimental" which many writers perceive as the critical kiss of death. Ellen Friedman notes that "defined as the products of the devil or madness, or at least eccentricity, her books - as far

as the public is concerned—have no authority and are thus disarmed" (Friedman *Now* 40).

It is my contention that literary critics share the responsibility for this disarming of Acker, because we have not developed ways of reading her texts, despite the obvious feminist implications of her exploration of the body as an essential component of female subjectivity. This critical impasse is perhaps generated by the fact that Acker's writing not only breaks the codes of accepted literary practice, but of accepted feminist practice as well. Acker's writing has been *dismissed* as "obscene" or even "misogynist," rather than *understood* as such. Acker herself insists that "an attack on the institutions of prison via language... demand(s) the use of a language or languages which aren't acceptable, which are forbidden. Nonsense doesn't per se break down the codes; speaking precisely what the codes forbid breaks the codes" (*Empire* 134).

Like Baraka/Jones, Acker incorporates into her critique of the unified metaphysical subject a deconstruction of the notion of authorial subjectivity. Where Baraka/Jones attaches one name to his early work, the other to writing published after 1966, Acker often constructs her titles in such a way as to make it seem that her text has two authors simultaneously, as in: *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula* and *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*. Similarly, when she gives her other novels the titles and plots of classic texts, such as *Don Quixote* and *Great Expectations*, Acker, in her own words, challenges "the incredible egotism that resulted from a belief in phallic centrism" and is responsible for the notion of creativity ("A Few Notes" 34). In carrying out this critique she even goes so far as to transpose the characters and passages from other texts into her own narratives, depriving those texts and their creators of their singularity, their fixed position in the Western literary canon.

Acker's assault on the unified authorial subject and the Western literary canon underscores the fact that, like her female protagonists, she must mediate her existence through texts already written, texts which figure her as an insensate body-thing. The dilemma of the female protagonist of *Don Quixote*, Don Quixote, is one which Acker, as a woman writer, shares: "BEING DEAD, DON QUIXOTE COULD NO LONGER SPEAK. BEING BORN INTO AND PART OF A MALE WORLD, SHE HAD NO SPEECH



OF HER OWN. ALL SHE COULD DO WAS READ MALE TEXTS WHICH WEREN'T HERS" (39).

In later works, Acker goes beyond deconstruction to attempt a kind of "realism" which emphasizes the material aspects of language. As she explains, "I have to use other texts when I write, that's just how I am, but now I don't have irony towards them. The irony is gone. I'm not interested in pulling them apart" ("Devoured by Myths" 24). Instead, Acker observes, "what I'm doing is simply taking text to be the same as world, to be equal to non-text" (13). In taking text to be "the same" as world, Acker does not convert world into text, but opens up text, or language, to materiality, to the body. She observes: "a sign is signifying something, but it also has its own aspects of sound, sight—its own materiality. It's always negotiating between its materiality and what it signifies" ("Kathy Acker Interviewed" 280).

The same can be said of Acker's female protagonists; they are always negotiating between their materiality and what it signifies in patriarchal culture, between the woman body-subject and the woman body-thing. Acker challenges the traditional alignment of women with nature and men with culture, not through references to a naturalized female body excluded from patriarchal discourse, but through a discourse generated by the female body as it is lived under patriarchy. One aspect of this body is that it in fact has no unity, it is not distinct from the mind in any way:

I didn't have to cry, because, inside, my stomach and intestines were crying themselves into shreds as my blood, crying, dripped through its arteries and veins into the places it wasn't supposed to go. My body bloated with the winds." (Empire 113)

Acker's use of affect similarly goes beyond the individual experiences of her characters to saturate her texts. As Douglas Dix observes, "her affects—expressions of anger, grief, suffering and pleasure—are nomadic weapons that reach beyond her own introspective feelings; they explode out of her interior onto the plane of exteriority" (58-9). I would add that they emphasize the pain and the pleasure that accompany any transgression of the mind/body divide.

Acker's use of obscenity can be understood as another means of keeping the body in pieces, pushing the reader toward that divide where "mind" and "body" no longer exist as discrete

concepts. It is interesting to note that the English language has no obscenity for "the body," but only for body parts and functions. The taboo falls upon the part, not the whole, because the part resists translation. The part must be fiercely objectified and denigrated, because it is a partial subjectivity that threatens.

Acker's brand of realism is elucidated perhaps most clearly in her 1988 novel, *Empire of the Senseless*. *Empire* is the result of Acker's brief but fertile flirtation with the genre of cyberpunk, a genre characterized by

its overwhelming fascination, at once celebratory and anxious, with technology and its immediate... effects upon human being-in-the-world, a fascination which sometimes spills over into the problematizing of reality itself. (Hollinger 205)

In many ways, *Empire* functions as an allegory for the process of coming-to-speech as a woman body-subject in patriarchal society.

Abhor, the female protagonist of *Empire*, is a cyborg, "part black, part construct," from the start constituted as both body and not-body. Her monstrous ontology enables her to resist the mind/body split which plagues another female character in the novel:

Even though her IQ was high, she couldn't understand how a high IQ and the desire to be loved as a female could exist together in one body. Since her body thus had to be monstrous, she refused to go out..." (31).

The novel's first section, "Elegy for the Fathers," in which Abhor undertakes to "kill the father on every level," begins with her being raped by her father/stepfather (the confusion is intentional), the first of many rapes which occur throughout the narrative to Abhor and other female characters. Painful as it is, the breaking of the incest taboo results in the disappearance of the despotic figure of the Oedipal Father, who can exist only as law and language.

Released from her Oedipal identity as daughter, Abhor is free to wander the streets of Paris, discovering that materiality and language come together in her desire, a desire "which, endless, was limited neither by a solely material nor by a solely mental reality" (65). Everywhere Abhor looks, she sees some combination of physicality and mentality, or body and language. In the voodoo

practices of the Haitian revolutionaries plotting to take over the city, she realizes, "the physical (in reference to a human, the body), an axis, crosses the other axis, mentality (in a human, the mind). A cross; a crossroads; the problem of human identity" (64-5). The Haitians eventually kill their colonizers, the French, with poison, from which there is no escape. Abhor observes: "Poison entered the apartments of the bourgeoisie. There is a way to stop guns and bombs. There's no way to stop poison which runs like water" (77).

In the second part of the novel, entitled "Alone," Acker attempts to construct a society that "isn't defined by Oedipal considerations," in which "taboos are no longer taboo" (Friedman "Conversation" 17). Abhor gravitates toward the pirate-sailor section of town, a marginal realm whose inhabitants resist and usurp the law in one and the same gesture, where "the knife of the hand will slice off the knife of the law" (*Empire* 114). This is the realm of (criminal) homosexuality and the tattoo, both practices which underscore that the path to body-subjectivity lies in "un-natural," indeed guilty, uses of "the body." The narrative leaves Abhor to follow the adventures of her mirror image, a male sailor named Agone, and the focus from the horror (Abhor) of the older order to the struggle (Agone), to live differently. This translation is made via Agone's first tattoo.

The tattooer was drawing the outlines of a sailing ship. Reminiscence of that dreamtime when humans were free. Historically, criminality is the only freedom humans have had. Like the edges of a dream during the waking state, tattooing showed the sailor that dreams are made actual through pain. Humans make themselves and 're made through pain plus dreams. (138)

In the tattoo, Acker locates once more the coming together of "the material and not material." For her, the tattoo is the most positive thing in *Empire*, because it "concerns taking over, doing your own sign-making" (Friedman "Conversation" 17).

In the third and final section of the novel, "Pirate Night," Abhor realizes that even her criminal body-subjectivity is subject to reappropriation by the dominant discourse. In a scene borrowed from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Abhor's boyfriend Thivai and his gay friend Mark, standing in for Tom and Huck, concoct an elaborate plan to rescue Abhor (who unwittingly occupies the position of Twain's Jim, the fugitive

slave), from jail. True to the spirit of Tom and Huck, they decide she'll be a more romantic figure if she remains a prisoner. They decide to "make Abhor, though she was uneducated, or because she was uneducated, into a great writer so that she's have a reason being in jail for the rest of her life. At that time," Acker adds ironically, "society needed a great woman writer" (203).

Thivai and Mark cut Abhor's thumb and show her how to write in her own blood, because, they insist, "writers need disability or madness they can overcome in order to write" (ibid.). When Abhor writes independently of her tutors, "FUCKFACES ALL MEN" and "THIS SHIP IS SINKING," she is ridiculed as "a baby falling flat on her or his face" (204). When she writes her supposed liberators a note accusing them of collaborating to keep her in jail "by planning escapes so elaborate they had nothing to do with escape... [and] always fucking deciding what reality is and collaborating about these decisions," Thivai and Mark merely giggle (210).

Abhor finally finds a motorcycle with which to make her own escape, but Thivai informs her that she cannot ride it unless she learns the rules of behavior written down in "The Highway Code." When she attempts to drive using the Highway Code she gets in a series of absurd accidents and decides that "the problem with the following rules is that, if you follow rules, you don't follow yourself" (219). Abhor then parks by the side of the road and begins to inscribe signs she has seen along the road onto the Code, alongside her own words. At the end of this palimpsest, Abhor places her own "sign," a picture of a sword piercing a rose and the words "Discipline and Anarchy." While this ostensible "new" sign at first appears to uphold the opposition between masculine technology (denoted) and feminine nature (denoted by the rose), Acker realizes that that division, too, is untenable:

Then I thought about how a sword pierces a cunt. Only my cunt is also me. The sword pierces me and my blood comes out.

It doesn't matter who has handled and shoved in this sword. Once this sword is in me, it's me. I'm the piercer and the pierced. (224)

Possessed of this "new sign," Abhor begins to imagine "a world which is beautiful, a society which isn't just disgust" (227).

In order to generate a critical response to Acker's writing which isn't itself "just disgust," we as literary critics must also develop a new sign, or a new understanding of the sign might focus on the interplay between its signifying and its material properties, generating a critical practice that combines disciplined attention to the "rules" of language with the anarchic impulse not merely to subvert, but to defy them.

The most significant of these anarchic critical impulses, as it concerns both of the authors I have considered here today, would be to take up the notion of body-subjectivity, not in place of deconstructive analyses of the body-object, but as a means of pushing beyond the mind/body divide. Much has been made of Nietzsche's influence on the poststructuralists; it has been said that Nietzsche is in fact the one who put us in the prison-house of language by exposing truth to be a function of language. But Nietzsche also made war on the primacy of "consciousness" in Western thought and described the entire evolution of the spirit as "the history of the development of a higher body that emerges into our sensibility" (Nietzsche 358). What better place to look for the development of this "higher body" than the work of writers like Baraka/Jones and Acker, whose political commitment to representing the body-subjectivity of those known to dominant discourse only as body-objects is accompanied by a complex critique of the unified subject and a fundamental optimism concerning the possibilities of language.

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# Cross-Cultural Othering Through Metamorphosis

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Kristi M. Wilson

In her 1995 book, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Judith Halberstam calls for an historic reading of nineteenth-century Gothic fiction and twentieth-century horror cinema in terms of their shared participation in the process of "Othering." In both genres, monsters function as technological subjects which contain and reveal (*monstrare*) social anxieties about race, class, sexuality and gender. In this paper I will be comparing the narrative structures of Clive Barker's 1987 film, *Hellraiser* and Apuleius's second-century story, *The Golden Ass*, to provide evidence for pre-nineteenth-century "othering machines" and to argue against Halberstam's assertion that the monsters of modernity are unique in their proximity to humans (which I assume refers to their presence in or around the domestic sphere) and unique in their tendency to indicate the collapsible nature of boundaries.

According to Halberstam, Gothic fiction gave nineteenth-century readers the excitement of reading about perverse physical activity while situating the Other (sexually, racially, etc.) in the foreign body of the monster. Nineteenth-century authors sought answers to political questions concerning race, class and sexuality, and Gothic writing reflected an urge to discuss these themes in terms of biological separation. Similarly, horror cinema functions as a "technology of subjectivity, one which produces the deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known"(2). Drawing upon Homi Bhabha's essay, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism" (1986), Halberstam identifies skin as one of the key signifiers of cultural and racial differences which functions similarly in Gothic fiction and contemporary horror films. Skin, a motif which will serve as one of the important links between my discussions of *The Golden Ass* and *Hellraiser*, enforces a stereotype in the genres of Gothic fiction and horror cinema which simultaneously stabilizes the Other within a discourse of racist representation and acknowledges their power as a threat to notions of racial purity.

The spectacle of skin in horror films (especially those of the slasher variety) often complicates representations of sex and race, taking the spectator beyond the realm of what he or she might normally consider human. Gothic technologies of subjectivity then, be they literary or filmic, have the capacity to blur gender, class, race and sexual boundaries.

According to Halberstam, new categories for contemplation are created in Gothic fiction which do not, especially in the case of horror cinema, lend themselves to strict, traditional, psychoanalytic interpretation in terms of a male/female binary. What is needed instead, is a "queer" reading of these genres in which improperly configured bodies represent the limit of the human and project this limit in terms of social mores. Halberstam uses Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection located within a familiar but foreign body to bridge the gap between the genres of nineteenth-century Gothic fiction and horror cinema. In her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva characterizes "the abject" as an indescribable Other that blurs one's system of identity, clarity and order. Abolishing boundaries and rules, this nondescript entity torments the subject with the threat of a return to a chaotic and fluid existence. In both genres, according to Halberstam, the monster functions as an economic othering machine reflecting a plurality of social fears and anxieties and linking the realm of the psychological to the process of the political.

Clive Barker's 1987 film, *Hellraiser*, is just one of many horror films obsessed with skin, class, race, sexuality and monstrosity. But Barker's film is inextricably linked to a literary tradition which made its appearance much earlier than Gothic fiction. I would like to compare *Hellraiser* with Apuleius's second-century narrative about metamorphosis, *The Golden Ass*, not to challenge Halberstam's notions about the Gothic literary connection to contemporary horror cinema, but to add another layer to her eclectic reading of horror films and perhaps to trace at least some of the functions of the monstrous narrative to early metamorphic literary subjectivities. *The Golden Ass* and *Hellraiser* bear striking similarities to one another with respect to their narrative structures and ideological concerns. Both tend to present discourses around cultural differences and societal boundaries in terms of a metamorphic transformation, the central event shared by both narratives. I hope to explore some of the shared ideological concerns of both narratives

illuminated in the figure of the metamorphic Other, such as the threat of the foreign to the familiar, the relationship between master and slave, the relationship between pleasure and pain, skin as a narrative signifier, and curiosity and the consequences of its fulfillment.

Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, also known as *Metamorphoses*, is a narrative about the misadventures of a young, "cultured," Greek businessman traveling in foreign lands. On his trip, our hero, Lucius, is overcome by his own curiosity about the local customs of sorcery. While experimenting with a magic potion, he accidentally turns himself into an ass. Having witnessed a witch rub magic ointment over her body and turn into a bird, Lucius, eager to do the same and satisfy his wild desire to fly around and spy on people unobserved, unknowingly applies the wrong ointment. Instead of attaining what he imagined would be a new sense of freedom, he winds up imprisoned by his curiosity in the body of an ass. As a beast of burden he is forced to endure a slave-like existence and suffers continual violent beatings at the hands of his masters. Eventually, Lucius is metamorphosed back into his human form. But this occurs only after he has been purified of his base curiosity and initiated into the mysteries of the cult of the goddess Isis, known for her chaste powers in the areas of motherhood, marital devotion and healing. Isis was also famous for her talent for magic spells and charms, hence her significance later in the novel as Lucius's savior.

While many have argued that Apuleius's *Golden Ass* may be read as a rite of passage story or conversion tale, I tend to agree with William Fitzgerald's assessment of the text as valuable in terms of its inclination to attest to the anxieties and fantasies created by the presence of institutionalized slavery in the ancient imagination. In his unpublished paper, "The Metamorphosis of Slavery: Apuleius's *Golden Ass*," Fitzgerald argues that Lucius's fantastical metamorphosis into a domesticated beast of burden is an allusion to slavery. He cites frequent associations between the beast (especially the ass) and the slave in ancient texts, and the popularity of deracination and loss of status as themes in the Greek novel. Apuleius's narrative, like nineteenth-century Gothic fiction and twentieth-century horror films, provides its audience with titillating and often perverse entertainment centered around unspoken social anxieties (in this case slavery) while locating the



origin of these disturbing fantasies in the foreign body of the metamorphosed (monstrous) creature. Unlike most monsters, however, Lucius has the conscience of a human. As in the case of Gothic fiction and horror films, skin, as we shall see later, occupies a special place in *The Golden Ass*, signifying cultural difference and representing the threat of the Other. Lucius's status as a foreigner in the narrative also plays a crucial role in establishing his asinine form as Other. Along with the fact that his metamorphosis occurs in foreign lands, Lucius's early admission of his foreign social status establishes a distance between the free members of a Roman audience and the actions of Lucius as narrator or ass. In Book I, Lucius begins his exotic tale with a disclaimer which reflects upon the difficulties of translating the accounts of his metamorphic journey (itself an adaptation from an earlier Greek story) into Latin:

So at the outset I beg your indulgence for my mistakes which I make as a novice in the foreign language in use at the Roman bar. This switch of languages in fact accords with the technique of composition which I have adopted, much as a circus-rider leaps from one horse to another, for the romance on which I am embarking is adapted from the Greek. Give it your attention, dear reader, and it will delight you. (I.1)

As in *The Golden Ass*, the concept of foreignness as a signifier of otherness plays an important role in Clive Barker's *Hellraiser*, itself a story about a man whose reckless curiosity about the unknown gets him into trouble. In the opening scene of the movie, Frank, a first-world thrill seeker, is in what appears to be a "third-world" country on the verge of purchasing a magic box, rumored to reveal all of the pleasurable secrets of the universe. The impoverished state of affairs in the foreign country is characterized in a racist and stereotypical manner by the dirty fingernails of the merchant and the sound of buzzing flies in the background, suggesting right away that the narrative is concerned with issues of xenophobia and economic power.

Frank, like Lucius, is something of a hybrid creature compared to the other characters in the film even before his metamorphosis. As well-off travelers and adventurers, Frank and Lucius have the ability to move freely from one realm to another. Though he holds a considerable amount of economic power in the foreign country,

a close-up shot of Frank's hand pushing a stack of dollar bills toward the merchant reveals that his fingernails are dirty as well. Frank is thus unafraid to delve into the third-world and get his hands dirty if it gets him what he wants.

Like Lucius, Frank's insatiable curiosity about the mysteries of those who are different from himself is the main reason that he ventures out of his native country and into an unknown realm. The result of Frank's experiences with those who are different from himself is the most disturbing element of *Hellraiser* and the most distinct marker of the film's ideological point of departure. Early in the film, we learn from alternating shots of Frank's room back home (seen from his brother Larry's terrified point of view) that he is fascinated with what Larry considers "abnormal" behavior. Explicit pornographic photos of Frank with a woman of color, a sexual statuette and various strange religious icons left behind in the house soon to be occupied by Larry and his new wife Julia, reveal that Frank, in Larry's view, is a sexual and social deviant. Upon discovering the paraphernalia, Larry reassures Julia that he, unlike his brother, is normal when he says, disgusted by the discovery of Frank's belongings, "this means nothing to me." Thus, the relationship between Frank and his brother Larry, characterized early on as one of conflicting interests, unveils a discourse in the film which pits inquisitiveness against rationality and resonates strongly with what Fitzgerald sees as the theme of Lucius's "slavish" curiosity found throughout *The Golden Ass*. Fitzgerald cites Plutarch's *De Curiositate*, in which the relation between a master and a slave to be controlled serves as a metaphor for the relation between reason and the senses. Apuleius himself distinguished between healthy and debased forms of curiosity in his *Apology*.

It is obvious from the beginning of *Hellraiser* that Larry and Julia are trapped in a passionless marriage. A move from Brooklyn to the family house in the country is the final attempt to salvage what is left of their relationship. A series of flashbacks inform us that unbeknownst to Larry, Frank and Julia became lovers on the eve of their wedding and that Julia is still in love with Frank. Their affair took the form of a highly erotic master-servant relationship in which Frank was in charge. Here the film comments on an incompatibility between the realm of pure sexuality and the institution of marriage as we see Frank and Julia make love on top of

her wedding gown. We are shown that after buying the small wooden puzzle-box, Frank returned to his country, enacted a quick homemade ritual in the attic of the house and unlocked the box. In his haste, Frank failed to realize that the ultimate pleasure he expected to discover can only be found through pain. Upon opening the box, Frank, like Lucius, becomes literally enslaved by his desires when, by curiosity, he sets free a group of creatures called the "sadomites." Although they rip apart his flesh to the point of total physical disintegration, Frank is not dead. He is temporarily metamorphosed into a primordial slime which lurks below the floorboards in the attic and can be restored to human form only with the blood of sacrificial victims. When Julia discovers Frank in the attic, midway between slime and human form, her feelings for him are rekindled and she reclaims her position as his love-slave, ready to kill for him.

Frank's relationship with and power over Julia calls to mind Apuleius's ancient discourse concerning gender and the slave's sexual function apparent in Lucius's pre-metamorphosis relationship with the slave-girl, Photis. Photis serves a combination of purposes in the household of Lucius's host, Milo. As Milo's only servant, she is in charge of his financial affairs, screening visitors at the front door, keeping up the house, cooking and serving the meals, and, of course, sexually pleasing his guests which include Lucius. As a guest in Milo's home, Lucius enjoys many wild sexual encounters with Photis in which the boundaries between the slave and the freeborn are blurred as the two individuals are described alternately as love-slaves of each other. Boundaries with respect to the slave's sexual function in terms of gender are complicated in the encounters between Lucius and Photis. In one lovemaking scene, Lucius states that "when I was wearied with her feminine generosity, Photis offered me a boy's (*puerile*) pleasure" (3.20). The allusion to Photis giving Lucius a boy's pleasure (*puerile*) and his sexual liaison in his asinine form with a woman (toward the end of the story) suggest a threatening polymorphous quality with respect to Lucius's sexuality somewhat akin to Frank's homoerotic desire reflected in his relationship with the mythic but clearly male sadomites in *Hellraiser*.

In her book, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, Sarah Pomeroy states that the slave's sexual function was, like the institution of slavery as a whole, ambiguous

and complex in the ancient world. Despite various attempts by ancient authors to define the slave, the state of slavery in Roman antiquity was one of fluidity in which people were continually being enslaved and manumitted. According to Pomeroy, "a woman might gain more prestige by marrying a slave than a free person, and...slaves and ex-slaves might be more highly educated and enjoy greater economic security than the freeborn poor" (191). The female slave was always available for sexual purposes with the master of the house, his guests, or other slaves with his permission. Though Lucius's status as a free gentleman officially establishes him as master in the relationship, Photis's sexual assertiveness in these encounters suggests a more ambiguous power relation which foreshadows the literal inversion of the master/slave hierarchy in which Photis will later appear to be Lucius the Ass's only hope for salvation. Having been her metaphoric love-slave, Lucius is literally enslaved to Photis for survival. It is important to keep in mind that Apuleius's depiction of these wild sexual encounters stands in opposition to the virtuous discipline required by the cult of Isis, the real key to Lucius's passage back to his human form. Prior to his eventual initiation into the cult, Lucius is chastised by the priest of Isis for participating in what he considers base and improper behavior: "...on the slippery path of headlong youth you plunged into slavish pleasures and reaped the perverse reward of your ill-starred curiosity" (11.15). Similarly, Julia's affair with Frank is depicted as sordid and set against the backdrop of her boring but sanctioned marriage. In a flashback, Julia remembers that, after making love to her for the first time, Frank was frustrated and unfulfilled by the experience: "It's not enough," he said to her. Later in the film, after his metamorphosis and partial reconstruction, Frank tells her about the magic box which opened "doors to the pleasures of heaven or hell." The sadomites, he explains, taught him pleasure and pain as one ecstasy: "pleasure and pain indivisible."

The sadomites, mystic creatures who live hidden inside the puzzle-box until they are called forth, resemble the physical embodiment of pain. With human-like bodies severely mutilated and pierced, they are both the victims and inflictors of torture. With a touch of the magic box, these leather-clad creatures transform any ordinary space into a world of pleasure and pain characterized by the sudden appearance of their tools: medieval torture wheels,



chains and hooks. When asked who they are, the leader of the sadomites replies: "explorers in the further regions of experience; demons to some, angels to others." Though Frank spends most of his time in the film trying to escape from being caught and tortured by the sadomites, he shows no signs of regret about his sadomasochistic history with them and harbors a certain amount of delight with respect to the erotic memories of his torturous experiences: "some things have to be endured and that's what makes the pleasure so sweet." Similarly, Lucius, even after a hard day's labor as a beast of burden harnessed to the mill, values nothing more than the fact that his eyes are unblindfolded. The joy brought on by the prospects of satisfying his curiosity about the people around him often outweighs his physical needs for nourishment and rest (9.22).

Though she is willing to take certain sexual risks with Frank, Julia is visibly repulsed by what she sees when she gazes into the puzzle box and catches a glimpse of Frank's past activities with the sadomites. She reinforces her commitment to do whatever it takes to keep Frank safely by her side, away from their strange sexual powers. Here Julia can be seen as aligned ideologically with the priest of Isis in *The Golden Ass* as the symbol of salvation through "correct" behavior (in this case, heterosexuality). Julia, in her symbolic role as a savior, bears a similarity to Photis as well, as both women attempt to bring the men who were previously their masters back to human form after they are left helpless by their metamorphoses. Julia and Photis experience reversals of position and status in their households when they find that they are the only ones who know about their lovers' transformations and the only ones who can help them return to the human realm. In the meantime, Frank and Lucius lurk undetected as voyeurs in their respective domestic spheres. The reversals of fortune of Julia and Photis, and Frank and Lucius, reflect similar anxieties in both narratives about shifting power relations. According to Fitzgerald, the institution of Roman slavery, with its ironies and contradictions in terms of who held what type of power within the household and society, had a paradoxical and uncanny aspect akin to Halberstam's discussion of the uncanny in Gothic fiction:

In fact, Roman slavery might well be described as an institution through which human nature was metamorphosed, for although,



to the ancient mind, the slave was a different order of being than the free person, there was a constant passage between the two statuses as slaves were manumitted and the free enslaved. This paradox made a hybrid of both the free and the slave. (7)

Halberstam suggests that "identity itself is uncanny" (75). Bodies in monstrous Gothic narratives, like haunted houses, hide or enslave secret selves. Bodies function similarly in *The Golden Ass* and *Hellraiser*, as the advent of metamorphosis establishes a haunted feeling in the domestic sphere. In Book IX of *The Golden Ass*, the uncanny expression on Lucius's face frightens the baker's abusive wife, in whose house he is living, as it does not accord with that of a beast. The hybridization of his identity as an ass/slave/nobleman allows Lucius to provoke fear and anxiety in his oppressors. In the case of the baker's wife, Lucius actually does take action and exacts revenge for being continually abused by exposing her adulterous behavior:

As I passed the tub I noticed the tips of the adulterer's fingers protruding through a narrow opening in his hollow cover. With a fierce sideways thrust of my hoof I stamped on them until they were thoroughly squashed, and the unbearable pain finally forced him to raise a tearful shout. He pushed the bin off him, and cast it aside; being thus restored to the gaze of the uninitiated, he revealed the character of that infamous woman. (9.27)

In his metamorphosed state, Frank too has the ability to haunt Julia and Larry's domestic sphere. Before reemerging from the realm of the sadomites, his slimy presence throbs menacingly in an embryonic sack under the floorboards of the attic, promising one day to burst forth. Frank's metamorphosis literally takes the shape of a birth suggesting that he is somehow the deformed offspring of Larry and Julia's failing relationship which lurks enslaved in the attic of the house at all times. Once the process of metamorphosis has begun, the fluidity of Frank's identity allows him to pass through the house unnoticed. He watches Larry and Julia make love and listens in on conversations, waiting for the right moment to perform the final necessary step in his metamorphosis: the acquisition of a new skin.

Returning for a moment to Halberstam's discussion of contemporary horror cinema, we see that skin is described as a visual pun not only to signify one as other but to show horror and its

permeability on the screen. She defines the pun as "the production of difference through playful repetition" (178). Once Frank puts on the skin of another, his transformation should be complete and he should be able to cross over into the realm of the human. As we discover, however, Frank's transformation does not close the door on his hybrid existence. Having murdered his brother and put on his skin, Frank discovers to his dismay that his new hide, bursting at the seams and easily torn, is hardly sufficient to hide his oozing inner identity. Frank is not destined to escape the sadomites whose magic has the power to reach beyond and rip apart any surface including skin, and as we see in the film, brick walls and television screens.

The Latin word for skin, *corium*, synonymous with hide, strap, and leather, plays an important role in the creation of the identity of Lucius the Ass. *Corium* signifies his metamorphosis in that it marks him as a slave, indicates the means of his torture, and serves as a cover for Lucius's real identity. At one point in the story, Lucius is almost literally reduced to a *corium* when bandits threaten to skin him and sew a girl into his hide to torture her. Lucius's exchange of his skin for a hide turns him into a hybrid creature. The pun on *corium* is used in *The Golden Ass* to establish Lucius the Ass visually as Other and to illustrate comically the threatening aspects of the membrane-thin permeability of the boundary between the slave and the freeborn.

In both *Hellraiser* and *The Golden Ass*, skin is referred to in so many different ways that the texts become permeable with respect to meaning and fail, as in the case of Gothic fiction, to be rendered readable in terms of any single interpretation. Instead, the narratives present historically specific heterogeneous cultural discourses around the social functions of class, sexuality, and gender which hinge on the advent of metamorphosis. In a sense, the metamorphosed human, by the sheer force of its fluid existence, shares almost all of the nineteenth-century monster's ideological functions and may be seen as a more threatening literary and filmic device in its capacity to cross cultural boundaries and return to tell about the experience. This is not to say that Frank and Lucius return unscathed from their journeys, however. Once they have lived on the border between upper-class male and Other, neither hero can ever be completely stable in his recovered human state. Almost as soon as he becomes a mortal again, Frank is caught and

contained by the sadomites who once more reduce him to slime and remind him that the price for his type of curious pleasure is a heavy dose of pain. Lucius's return to human existence through initiation into the cult of Isis is precarious as well. In the first place, he is transformed by Isis only under the condition that he renounce the very curiosity that gave him so much pleasure, even as a slave. Secondly, the actual initiation takes three attempts and if that isn't comical enough, Apuleius adds a note of irony to the scene of Lucius's metamorphosis as the onlookers mention that he must have led an extremely pure life [clearly not the case] to be favored so by the goddess. Roman audience members would have known that Lucius's past activity had been anything but pure. Thus, if the first metamorphosis makes a hybrid of the man in these narratives, the second restores him to a human form forever insecure in its stability, reinforcing an ideology which implies that once a man has had contact with the Other he will never be "normal" again.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See also Eric White, "The Erotics of Becoming: Xenogenesis and *The Thing*," *Science-Fiction Studies* 20 (1993): 394-408.

<sup>2</sup> Professor William Fitzgerald's 1995 unpublished article, "The Metamorphoses of Slavery: Apuleius's Golden Ass," is part of a larger project he is currently working on at the University of California, San Diego.

<sup>3</sup> Translation by P. G. Walsh, *The Golden Ass* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> See Aristotle's *Politics* (1254b) for his theory about the body of the slave; and M.I. Finley's discussion on Demosthenes's descriptions of the slave in *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*.

<sup>5</sup> Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*. Translation by J. Arthur Hanson.

<sup>6</sup> Photis's role as the savior is eventually taken over by Isis who actually makes possible Lucius's return to his human body.

<sup>7</sup> Translation by P. G. Walsh.

<sup>8</sup> "Hunc omnipotentis hodie deae numen augustum reformavit ad homines: felix Hercule et ter beatus qui vitae scilicet praecedentis innocentia fideque meruerit tam praeclarum de caelo patrocinium, ut renatus quodam modo statim sacrorum obsequio desponderetur." (11.16)

"Today the venerable power of the almighty goddess has restored him to the ranks of men. How happy, how blessed three times over he is! Doubtless through the purity and faith of his

former life he has deserved such sovereign protection from heaven, and in consequence he has been in a manner reborn, and has at once pledged himself to the service of her cult." (Walsh)

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- Hellraiser*. Dir. Clive Barker. Videocassette. New World Video, 1987.

# Jamming the Machine: Yves Klein's *Blue Monochrome* and the End of the Avant-Garde

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*J. Stephen Murphy*

In the past few years, we have seen the emergence of a new dialogue between what C.P. Snow referred to as the two cultures, i.e. the humanities and the sciences. The growing importance of information technology in the academy coupled with the boom of interest in chaos theory has created a climate in which many critics in the humanities have turned to science as a new resource for their work. This essay will attempt to further encourage this conversation between the cultures by turning to the ideas of Ilya Prigogine, a Belgian scientist who won the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1977, in the hope that they can not only shed light on a theory of art, but in turn, that art can shed light on scientific theory. My work entails an introduction to Prigogine's work on entropy, evolution, dissipative structures and complex machines. Prigogine and I share a common interest in newness, he in new structures, I in new artworks. Taking Yves Klein's blue monochrome paintings as exemplars of the new and thinking of the artwork in terms I will later define as machinic, it is my aim to account for artistic evolution in the same way that Prigogine accounts for biological evolution.

Ilya Prigogine has commented on the coincident development in the middle of the nineteenth century of two conflicting theories of evolution. From life sciences came an evolutionary model that describes life beginning in some chaotic pool of proteins that joined together to form a basic organism. From that most basic life form evolved an incredible variety of highly complex, amazingly diverse life forms. Physics, on the other hand, as described by the Second Law of Thermodynamics, speaks of a universe in which entropy is constantly increasing, a universe continuously moving towards greater disorder, moving, that is, towards equilibrium.

It may seem odd to understand disorder as equilibrium, but a quick illustration should clarify that notion. An ice cube is an organized state of water. It will slowly melt into a puddle of room temperature. It will stay in this state of equilibrium unless some-



thing works on the ice cube from the outside; it will not spontaneously turn back into an ice cube. We can think of entropic equilibrium as the end of becoming. The ice cube will undergo many changes as it melts, but it will eventually end up in a state where it will no longer change; the room temperature puddle is the end of possibilities. The French philosopher Michel Serres argues that the Second Law of Thermodynamics scientifically proves what we intuitively know: time moves in only one direction. Time moves irreversibly towards greater entropy (Serres 71).

As narratives of the universe, evolution puts order at the end of its story while entropy places it at the beginning. Clearly, there is a contradiction in these statements. How can the universe be moving toward chaos as it grows more organized? How can we explain the great amount of structure and organization we encounter in the world without denying the fact of entropy?

Work allows for the existence of highly organized structures. The ice cube stays frozen through the work of a freezer; the human body keeps itself alive through the work of its organs and systems. This ability to maintain its own integrity and the ability to grow and reproduce are the largest differences between the organic and the inorganic structure.

The organic structure does not, however, escape or defeat entropy. The genius of Prigogine lies in his refutation of this hypothesis; he argues that it is in fact entropy that makes evolution possible. Before we see how this is so, we must consider the phenomenon of self-organization, a key concept in Prigogine's work. In order to retain its integrity against entropy, an organism must be organized and stay organized. The biological structure organizes itself through a "continual expenditure or dissipation of energy that keeps it away from . . . equilibrium" (Paulson 105). Absolute entropy can be understood as the end of movement; the organic or dissipative structure avoids entropy by keeping itself moving. It does so through a continuous exchange of energy with its environment and between its internal systems. We are confronted again with a strange contradiction. The dissipative structure avoids entropy by expending energy.

We would think that the dissipation of energy would increase the entropy in the structure, and it does, but only to be recovered again as higher organization. The dissipative structure can make this recovery because it is complex. William Paulson defines a

complex structure as an organization of many parts and systems, all existing at different levels in different relations to each other. Unlike a car, also made up of many interacting parts, the body, an exemplary complex structure, cannot be understood through an understanding of its parts. Complexity is more than the sum of its parts (Paulson 107-108).

The dissipative structure can remain far from equilibrium because complexity allows for the existence of different levels of entropy within the different parts of the structure. This difference in energy levels creates a flow within the structure, a movement of energy from levels of lower entropy to levels of higher entropy. Within the body, energy flows from organ to organ, from the outside world to the inner world, from system to system; it is through this flow, the continuous change and exchange occurring at the micro-level, that a constant state far from equilibrium is maintained at the macro-level of the body. The observation of this microstructural flow within macrostructural stability led Michel Serres to describe the dissipative structure as homeorrhetic (*homos* meaning the same, and *rhesis*, flow). Serres coined this neologism to emphasize the dynamism of the dissipative structure against the stability emphasized in the word homeostasis. Stability is maintained only through movement, or as Serres vividly describes it, "[The] river flows and yet remains stable in the continual collapse of its banks" (74).

Homeorrhexis keeps the structure away from equilibrium. We can explain the persistence of a highly organized structure as maintenance of order in the face of entropy, but how are we to explain evolution, the creation of structure? We must look again to homeorrhexis and complexity for an answer. At the microstructural level, we can observe "short-scale randomness, providing the innovative element necessary to explore the state space" and at the macrostructural level "long-range order, enabling the system to sustain a collective regime encompassing macroscopic spatial regions and macroscopic time intervals" (Prigogine, *Exploring Complexity* 218). This short-scale randomness is of vital importance in evolution. The dynamic micro-level experiences certain breaks or bifurcations, as Prigogine calls them, in its flow (*Exploring Complexity* 71-75). In evolutionary terms, the bifurcation is more commonly known as a mutation. It is the bifurcation that leads to evolution because it threatens the stability of this steady state; the

bifurcation creates an increase in entropy in the structure. This entropy gives way to further fluctuations within the system that threaten to carry it "to one of the possible, new branches of solution" ("The Challenge of Complexity" 9). This threat to order must be organized; the macrostructure is transformed as it reorganizes itself against increasing entropy. The mutation, an extra chromosome for example, must either be put to use in furthering the species with an extra chromosome, or the species might be destroyed. It is the bifurcation, then, that provides the innovative element. Prigogine tells us, "the possibility of a dissipative structure depends on boundary conditions, but they themselves are modified by the occurrence of dissipative structures" ("Unity of Physical Laws" 12). The boundary of the homeorrhetic structure is the place of bifurcations, where entropy is introduced and then reorganized into a new structure, a structure now containing disorder as its order.

Michel Serres believes that evolution should be understood as negentropy, that is, as a process of organization into greater order (Serres 73). If we can understand entropy as the irreversibility of time, then evolution is, as Michel Serres points out, a reversing of time (Serres 82). Evolution is a way of avoiding the end because it ensures always more possibilities, more combinations, more structures left to be created against the limit of possibility embodied in the notion of entropy.

Art is frequently thought of in evolutionary terms. Art grows more complex, more structured as time passes; each artist learns from his predecessors, takes up their challenges and creates new works out of the tradition, thereby transforming the tradition. As it happens in the natural world, the art world operates in order to avoid its end, to avoid the end. Much as life forms must continually expend energy to preserve their structures and must reproduce themselves, so too must the community of artists, patrons, critics and the audience create new artworks in order to maintain its integrity.

Art is not, of course, a living organism, yet it exhibits many of the characteristics peculiar to organic structures. The artwork is a machine, a complex homeorrhetic machine itself a part of the larger art machine. Why talk about a painting as a machine? First, to emphasize that it is inanimate and yet dynamic. A machine is not a living thing, yet we think of machines in a qualitatively

different way than we think of inanimate objects such as tables or rocks. It is an almost-living thing. My second reason for describing art as machinic is based on the model given us by cybernetics. Cybernetics studies machine systems, especially those in which human beings interact with machines, forming a kind of organic-machinic circuit. One might think of the World Wide Web in these terms. Art exists in the interaction between people, between people and objects, between objects. It cannot be located in any one site, but only in the totality of the flowing circuit. The final reason I refer to the artwork as machinic is to draw attention to the intimate connection between the artwork of our century and machines. On a strictly pragmatic level, new art forms have largely risen out of new technologies. Avant-gardism and technologism, in their demand for the ever-new, have served as our century's guiding motivations for production. A study of Yves Klein will afford a better understanding of the machinic nature of the avant-garde.

Yves Klein (1928-1962) was a French painter who is regarded as one of the most important artists of the post-War era, a precursor to minimalism, Pop, and conceptualism. Klein's most famous paintings, his blue monochromes, were exhibited in the mid-fifties. It was an exhibit of eleven identical paintings, all of them the same size, all of them the same smooth-surfaced, solid, uniform blue cotton canvases. They look as if they are mass-produced. The initial reaction to Klein's exhibition of blue monochromes was highly antagonistic. He was accused of being a charlatan playing a depraved joke on the art world. Today he is considered one of the great artists of our century.

Like all cutting-edge artists, Klein was interested in beginnings and endings. The new artwork is both an endpoint, a forestalling of the end, and a beginning. It is an end in its position at the culmination of a tradition. It is a forestalling of the end, a negentropic force as is evolution, because the continued production of new order resists the increasing disorder of the universe. It is a beginning because the new work gives rise itself to new art forms.

Klein saw his blue monochromes as endworks, the "final link" in a tradition of avant-gardism started by the Impressionists (Stich 84). Writing about these paintings in his book, *"mon livre,"* Klein recounts an old Persian tale about a flute player who one day began to play a single, continuous note on his flute. This went on



for twenty years. Finally, the man's wife, a little bored by then, said to her husband, "Listen to all the other flute players. Hear all the wonderful, varied and interesting sounds they make." The man responded to his wife that it was not his fault that he had found the note all the others were still hunting for (Klein qtd. in Stich 81). In his blue monochromes, Klein felt that he had found the color, had created the painting all other artists were looking for. Klein saw his blue monochromes as the end of the new, the achievement of total entropy, a state of perfect equilibrium from which no new art forms could come.

Or so Klein would have us think. The fact is that new art forms have continued to appear; Klein himself went on to create a lot more work. Newness has not ended. It is hard to imagine it ending anytime soon because in a homeorrhetic machine the end is always programmed into the machine; it is part of the machine. The possibility of the end keeps the machine running.

I am being rather abstruse. To get a more concrete idea of what I am talking about let us return to Prigogine's model. Production, Prigogine shows us, takes place only in far-from-equilibrium conditions. In the living organism, disequilibrium is produced through a fluctuation between the micro-levels of the body's organs and systems and the macro-level of the body or the micro-level of the organism and the macro-level of the species. In terms of the artwork, we see a similar fluctuation between the micro-level of the artwork and the macro-level of art, the tradition, the canon and its accepted conventions. This fluctuation between part and whole, new and old keeps the entire machine in a state of disequilibrium. The new work can be understood as the micro-structural appearance of "short-scale randomness" while the tradition is the macrostructural level of long-range order, enabling the system to sustain a collective regime encompassing macroscopic spatial regions and time intervals. New artworks are coming into the world everyday; we are always encountering works for the first time, but despite their novelty or difference from every other artwork we have seen, we still recognize them as art; we place them within the body of art, if not within a particular school and period in the history of art. We witness a continuous flow on the micro-level and a continual stability on the macro-level: the flowing of the new, the sameness of the tradition—this is why we call art a homeorrhetic machine.



We have seen how the art machine maintains its integrity through this fluctuation between the microstructural level of the individual work or works and the macrostructure of the canon, through the active location of the individual work within the body of art, giving order both to the part and the whole. But how do we explain the creation of new artworks? It is at the micro-level, at the boundary of the avant-garde machine that we shall find an answer. If the canon is maintained through a continual identification of itself, by organizing individual works as artworks, what happens when the machine encounters works that resist identification and organization? Do some works break the flow, jam the *rhesis*? Prigogine describes these breaks as bifurcations. These bifurcations lead to evolution because they threaten the stability of the state; the bifurcation creates an increase in the structure's entropy level.

Because they did not conform to accepted definitions and conventions of art, Klein's blue monochromes were bifurcations in the machine's structure. They broke all the rules by which art organizes itself. They are non-representational. They lack a subject matter or title to guide us in any way. They bear no mark of human creation or authorship nor any kind of signature in style. They are not even unique. How can these paintings be considered art? They were not by many of those who first saw them. Klein was delighted by "the real depth of the bewilderment that [they] brought about in men of good will who are so very little concerned about passively submitting to the sclerosis of known concepts and established rules" (Stich 81). The blue monochromes jammed the machine. They blocked the proper operation of the art machine. If the machine operates as I have described it through the identification of new artworks and organization of the work into the machine, making its structure larger and larger, then what the blue monochromes do is resist being identified and organized as art.

The appearance of the bifurcation in the machine challenges the machine to either organize this disturbance or succumb to eventual disorder. The jam can only be fixed if the structure reorganizes itself. The definition of art, the limits of what art is, must be expanded so that the blue monochromes can be organized within the structure. Only after this reorganization of the machine and of the bifurcation can the work be understood as new. The artwork only becomes new in retrospect, upon its acceptance into

the tradition. The art of the new is thus a relic of the past. Once we recognize it *as* new, we can only say it *was* new. In this sense, we can say that newness does indeed end. The new is an ending.

It is also a forestalling of the end. The blue monochrome paintings, precisely because they do jam the machine, allow the machine to keep on running, to keep evolving. Entropy makes evolution possible. If the canon simply kept accruing new artworks to itself that perfectly fit within the limits of its structure, the machine would eventually reach a point of homogeneity, that is, the point of maximum entropy, death, the end. Variation and transformation must occur if the machine is to avoid equilibrium; this variation occurs at the bifurcation point. The machine must be jammed. This is what was meant earlier by the idea that the end is programmed into the machine. In organizing the blue monochromes within the structure of the machine, in transforming them into part of the tradition, the machine introduces the variation into itself. This higher organization is necessary to keep itself running.

Finally, the new artwork is a beginning. The machine recovers disturbances, absorbs any jam and puts it to work in the service of the machine, but in doing so, the machine is transformed. So, while we might see subversive artwork like the blue monochrome as ultimately failing in its ability to resist absorption within the machine's power, it is important to recognize that the machine only does so at a cost to itself. It opens up its boundaries, shifts them, and reveals those boundaries as contestable. So, while we can understand these paintings as an ending, the culmination of a historical tradition, Yves Klein's blue monochromes are not the end of newness. The *homos* of the machine, the sameness of tradition, is changed into a different sameness, a new sameness that will give rise to ever-new artworks.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Snow, C. P. *The Two Cultures*. 1959. Intro. Stefan Collini. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.

<sup>1</sup> Prigogine, Ilya. "Unity of Physical Laws and Levels of Description." pp. 1-2.

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## "What about the Audience?/What About Them?": Spectatorship and Cinematic Pleasure

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Tamara Harvey

Poststructuralist analyses of subjectivity tend to focus on the constitution of the Subject through the process of desire and the Subject's perceptions of an Other. These theories have broken ground in their critique of the unified Cartesian subject (the subject of empire) and of metaphysically guaranteed truth. But I want to explore pleasure, not desire. If desire is an experience of *différence* subtly informed by lack, pleasure is an experience of multiple differences often figured (I believe improperly) in terms of excess. In particular, I am interested in a kind of cinematic pleasure evident in genre film spectacles involving many bodies and moving outside an individual's *jouissance*.

Specifically, I discuss cinematic pleasure and the "Kool Thing" dance number from Hal Hartley's 1992 film *Simple Men*. Though Hartley's movie is not a genre film, I use recent genre film theories because they say something useful about pleasure and because this specific scene works as a "number" like those found in genre films. I chose *Simple Men* because it gives me pleasure, and because, though I don't have time to develop these ideas today, how we understand this scene reflects on our understanding of postmodernism—analyzing this film in terms of pleasure and spectacle provides an alternative to readings which emphasize market excesses and ironic citationality.

Genre films have been traditionally excluded from the canon of "serious" and aesthetically-redeemable films largely *because* they are concerned with pleasure rather than desire. Successful narrative is frequently connected to notions of desire—narrative is driven by a lack whose fulfillment is the carrot which leads both characters and readers alike toward the *dénouement*. When genre films are characterized as a string of numbers loosely held together by a weak plot, the "pleasure" of these films is still being defined in terms of desire. Their weak plots suggest that satisfaction comes too soon and too crudely; by this model, pleasure is simply the fulfillment of desire. The problem, I would argue, is that this



desire-model is still too subject-based and even elitist in its implicit judgment of the audience of genre films as cultural lemmings. The genre film theories I explore help us see the audience as a competent *community*.

Rick Altman, Carol Clover and Linda Williams point out in their studies of musicals, horror films, and porn that the logic of genre films is not that of a linear narrative aimed at suturing spectators into identifying with a central protagonist. Their work suggests three important aspects of spectatorial pleasure in these films: 1) connoisseurship, 2) multiple identifications, and 3) spectacle.

The first of these pleasures, connoisseurship, involves a sense of spectatorial mastery. As Carol Clover points out, horror film audiences are well versed in the topoi and traditions of the genre, and enjoy seeing how those elements are played out in a given film: "The 'art' of the horror film, like the 'art' of pornography, is to a very large extent the art of rendition or performance, and it is understood as such by the competent audience" (11). Thus, one takes pleasure in being able to recognize and evaluate the differences and similarities which occur between an individual film and the genre as a whole; there is a pleasure in the very sense of familiarity and competence. Moreover, there is also pleasure to be found in the social activity of comparing evaluations of these generic differences with others; discussion and debate over these differences brings out differences and similarities *among the viewers*.

The logic of comparison and connoisseurship extends to the general narrative logic of these films. Altman, Clover and Williams all argue for a logic of comparison between numbers as opposed to a more traditional narrative trajectory. For instance, musicals operate according to a logic of opposition and pairing in order to bring about the marriage of opposites which constitutes the inevitable happy ending. Likewise, the murders in slasher films usually establish a difference between the sexually active, expendable characters and the sexually inactive "Final Girl," and the sexual numbers in many hard-core films establish differences between bad, over-technical sex and good, spontaneous sex. In each of these cases, the dominant narrative logic is one of comparison rather than causality.

The second aspect of pleasure I have listed, multiple identifications, is especially emphasized by the above mentioned theorists. Again, this reflects an experience of difference rather than lack. Perhaps because of the sense of mastery arising from generic competence, perhaps in addition to this mastery, genre films can be seen as creating what Judith Mayne calls a "safe zone" (Mayne 97) in which spectators try on different identities. The predictability of the films' general moves creates a critical distance which adds to the sense of a safe zone already fostered by the typically anonymous viewing conditions of cinematic spectatorship. Altman, Clover and Williams especially focus on this "trying on" in terms of cross-gender identification, though the degree of play they identify varies considerably. These films foster non-unified spectators who inhabit different subject-positions rather than being dislocated by the experience of desire.

Finally, these movies provide the pleasure of spectacle and sensory stimulus. On the most simplistic level, spectacle in these films is to be found in the individual numbers considered apart from any narrative logic. Because of their non-linear narrative structures and their disruption of simple spectator-character identifications, there is a greater emphasis in genre films on atemporal sensory perception than in traditional narrative films. If pleasure is the experience of *differences* as I have defined it, how does this work in spectacle? The effect of spectacle is felt in the body of the spectator, and those felt sensory responses which accompany fear, arousal, or jubilation are sparked by outside stimuli. Pleasure felt in the body is dependent upon a sensory awareness of things outside the body. Again these are materially present differences rather than the lack of the Other.

Altman, Clover and Williams do not say as much as they could about spectacle. They are each interested in defending much maligned genres against detractors who characterize these films as feeble vehicles for a string of barely distinguishable numbers. In building this defense, they tend to emphasize alternative narrative structures and spectatorial economies while subordinating spectacle to these other elements. In general, they explain spectacle in terms of narrative relationships, although narrative itself is redefined in order to accommodate spectacle. This is a logical counter-attack against those who overemphasize and simplify numbers. Additionally, they tend to emphasize the question of gender

identity and bisexual masquerade, yet though the model of subjectivity posited here is multiple it is still characterized in fairly traditional, binary terms. Subjects identify with roles which are either male or female, and the bisexual blending of the genders is described as just that, a merger. This is no doubt reflected in the genres themselves, but I also want to suggest that there is something in the methodology of genre studies that contributes to both the narrative treatment of spectacle and the binary, merger model of cross-gender play. The methodology is not really spectacle-friendly. Clover, Altman, and Williams are all doing the initial work of establishing and categorizing a wide variety of films which are unfamiliar to academic audiences (at least in their academic capacities). This project resonates well with the logic of comparison that characterizes the narrative structures of these films. However, it is much more difficult to treat spectacle sympathetically and adequately within this methodological structure because spectacle, I argue, involves a sensory play which *defies* the dynamic of comparison. Comparison introduces notions of multiple identifications and subject positions which bring into question stable notions of subjectivity but it is still grounded in a relatively individualistic notion of subjectivity. Spectacle, I suggest, helps us move more radically away from individualistic subjectivity as the controlling paradigm.

Rick Altman provides both the foil and the foundation for my approach to musical spectacle in *Simple Men*. According to Altman, musicals and other melodramatic genres have a dual-focus rather than a single-focus structure. "Pairing-off is the natural impulse of the musical, whether it be in the presentation of the plot, the splitting of the screen, the choreography of the dance, or even the repetition of the melody" (32). Instead of seeing one scene as leading causally to the next, scenes in musicals work in pairs which establish the opposition between the central romantic pair. Thus, if the leading woman sings a song in one scene, the leading man must sing a song in a similar scene. This reflects the guiding romantic logic of musicals. Since the union of the romantic couple is the goal and outcome of most musicals, dissolves become structural metaphors for romantic merger. Dissolves leading into musical numbers also initiate a move from "real" into ideal space which mirrors the spectator's own relationship to the ideal space of the movie. Although I find Altman's analysis largely convinc-

ing, this emphasis on pairs and oppositions seems rather reductive. There has to be something more to cinematic pleasure besides the dynamic of synthesis best exemplified by romantic union.

Altman has a hard time accounting for dynamics that fall outside this binary model. In addition to duet and solo shots (solo shots are almost always paired), he describes a third shot as follows:

The third type of shot might be called unmarked, since it includes both men and women without marking any particular pairings. In general this rather unbalanced shot involves secondary characters and is more closely related to traditional notions of plot than are the other two types. Even here, however, where the love interest may seem absent, the viewer remains aware of the importance of any given shot or scene for the ultimate coupling. (35)

Similarly, Linda Williams compares trios like "Good Mornin'" in *Singin' in the Rain* to ménage à trois, suggesting that they are just another number in the typology of numbers (133). Indeed, they are less important than those duets which in musicals and porn alike embody the heterosexual romantic and sexual ideals of the genre. In other words, like Altman, she sees these scenes as being relatively unmarked. I believe that these scenes are especially important for our understanding of cinematic pleasure *because* they are unmarked and it is precisely these unmarked scenes which categorizing genre studies have a difficult time dealing with. Whereas Altman suggests that unmarked shots are "more closely related to traditional notions of plot," (35). I would suggest that they are less so because they are less clearly informed by the dynamics of desire. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that these scenes are better examples of spectacle because they are concerned with the surfaces of bodies as such rather than the play of desire between a pair or expressed by a solo. Unless it involves a lovers' triangle, trios tend to de-emphasize interpersonal dynamics because the exchange of looks between characters is much more difficult to follow and interpret.

The "Kool Thing" dance scene in *Simple Men* is one of only two musical scenes. As with numbers in genre films, this scene is logically connected to the narrative and serves important narrative functions, but is also in many ways separate from the narrative



of the film. And as in genre films the relationship of the viewer to this scene cannot be discussed in terms of simple identification. The scene begins with Martin driving up in his pick-up, squealing to a halt, jumping out and screaming "I can't stand the quiet!" as Sonic Youth's song "Kool Thing" begins. The film then cuts to the interior of the bar/pavilion where all the major characters dance. This entire dance scene is made up of a single shot, filmed at eye-level but at a distance and framed so as to suggest a sort of proscenium arch. First, Elina dances alone, with Martin and Dennis watching and then joining her. Then, Bill and Kate dance into view in the foreground of the scene, lit with a blue light. While they dance seductively together, we continue to see the trio dancing back and forth in the background. The camera then focuses once again on the trio and follows them to the right and back to the left, this time catching a glimpse of Kate and Bill in the foreground. The scene ends with an abrupt cut to a close-up of Kate sitting at a round table talking about Madonna. This inaugurates a discussion among the characters, who are seated at the table, about music and the exploitation of women.

It would be easy to read this dance scene as an ironic or campy production number in the midst of a film marked by absurd circumstances, vivid cinematography, and deadpan dialogue. Such a reading, however, does not do justice to the pleasure of this film. Rather than simply bracketing the dance as a random moment, I believe it is valuable to look more closely at the way pleasure engages viewers of the film. It is impossible on a single viewing to watch all the characters in the trio at once, and that, along with the dancing itself evokes the pleasure of spectacle that I've been describing. It is difficult to *organize* this scene in one's mind because we cannot easily map the specific dynamics of looking, approaching, and touching among the trio, as we can the gazing and touching between a pair of people, and as a consequence we are drawn into and *feel* the spectacle more. The pair of Bill and Kate, on the other hand, embodies desire and returns us to the realm of cognizable narrative. When there are only two figures, it is fairly easy to use binary comparison and narrative evaluations in order to make sense of the totality, but this is not as easy to do with three. Thus, the figure of the three is useful to me because it disrupts the binary and narrative logic which I find so troubling in Altman.



This is evident in the staging of the scene. The dance space is divided into three parts by a blue curtain (tied back) several feet from the left wall and a blue post several feet from the right wall. During Elina's original dance across the space, we see the left curtain but not the right post—the curtain does not organize the space in this first portion of the scene, and thus our attention is on Elina's movement through space. In the next traversal Dennis follows Elina, and in the third Martin joins in. Although with each addition the interpersonal dynamics of this trio changes somewhat, the emphasis remains on movement and dance. Thus it is very difficult to read the first part of this scene in terms of narrative. The dancers don't look at each other and their movements are basically in unison but idiosyncratic, further inhibiting narrative evaluation and emphasizing the physical play of difference. The third traversal, however, includes the blue post on the right, and once the trio passes this post, Kate and Bill dance from the right third into the center space as if from off stage, redefining the space as a stage rather than unmarked space. As the threesome continues to dance back and forth in the background, we see Martin jealously watch the couple in the middle. Finally, the camera leaves Kate and Bill and focuses on the threesome again in the right third of the space. They start traversing left once more, and this time while they are in the center space we see Bill and Kate blurred in the foreground. The scene ends in the left third of the space.

The space changes according to which set of dancers is inhabiting it. When the trio is dancing, the emphasis is on movement and space. On the other hand, when the couple dances into the center of the dance area it becomes a stage. Martin's jealous looks now remind us of his desires and the narrative more generally. According to this model, desire is connected with theatricality and narrative whereas pleasure is connected with spectacle and movement. The desiring couple have more power to redefine the space than does the trio—during the final traversal of the dance floor, the trio is not able to regain the space of pleasure.

Although I find it useful to make concrete distinctions between desire and pleasure in order to recognize a sense of materiality and non-binary play which is not subordinated to the presuppositions and impositions of narrative and which is in some ways empowering to the audience, there is something utopian in this urge. And, of course, it is a false dichotomy—part of the felt

pleasure I describe is driven by the *desire* to master the scene and see everything at once, just as the movement of narrative and desire also evokes pleasure. This utopian urge is perhaps natural; as both Richard Dyer and Rick Altman explain, musical entertainment is often concerned with creating a utopian effect. The musical number represents an ideal which differs from the "real" of the film's narrative while being connected to it by dissolve. Likewise, the musical space is held at a distance (a distance emphasized in this case by the smooth single shot which mimes a spectator's point of view and by the staged framing of the scene) so as to create a distinction between our real space and the film's ideal space which can then also be connected by dissolve. It is impossible to truly separate spectacle from narrative or pleasure from desire, yet it is important to remain aware of the differences between pleasure and desire, difference and lack, spectacle and narrative. Rather than seeing trios as inessential, unmarked anomalies, we need to recognize that they perform a different kind of work which destabilizes any pat model of narrative logic and of ideological closure. Utopian models often provide this kind of destabilizing impetus.

One problem with shifting away from familiar issues of individual subjectivity to spectacle is the potentially dangerous loss of agency or notions of agency through this dissolve into pleasure. The discussion of Madonna's sexuality which follows raises many of the ethical questions surrounding spectacle. As in the dance scene, the camera appears to mime self-consciously a spectator's point of view. However, our position as spectators in this second scene is less empowered. The camera looks up at each character from a position at or slightly below table top level. It focuses on each character in turn, while both that character and others speak. The characters are drunk and we too seem to share in this drunkenness: we watch each character's physical reactions to the others' comments for awhile after that character speaks instead of turning our attention to the new speaker. While this focused attention to the physical is to be expected when watching dance, it is unsettling when listening to dialogue. Again this suggests an interest in the visible apart from narrative or even discursive meanings, but because the camera does not move, we are trapped into a submissive position which is enhanced by the low-angle shots. Of course, during the dance scene we had to submit to the camera as well, but there the movement of the camera created an illusion of control—

the panning back and forth seemed natural. Here, though, we are made to submit, and that submission is pleasurable in a drunken sort of way.

Significantly, the discussion explicitly addresses problems of sexual exploitation and audience.

DENNIS: Everyone is involved with exploitation: The person whose body it is, the salesperson, and the audience that is entertained.

BILL: The significant distinction is: Who earns more money, the exploited body or the salesperson?

KATE: And what about the audience?

DENNIS: What about them?

BILL: Exploitation of sexuality has achieved a new respectability because some of the women whose bodies are exploited have gained control over that exploitation.

DENNIS: They earn more money.

BILL: (*Concurring*) They call the shots.

KATE: They're not thought of as victims.

BILL: If they earn the most money, no, they probably don't think of themselves as victims either.

DENNIS: But what about the audience?

BILL: What about them? (Hartley 57-58)

When the characters callously say "What about them?", it is funny, and we enjoy the joke not only despite, but because we are its butt. The first time the question of audience is raised, Kate seems to be asking whether the audience participates as an exploiter; the second time, Dennis seems to be asking whether the audience is victimized. Whereas during the dance scene we were able to enjoy the pleasure of spectacle and the play between pleasure and desire, spectacle and narrative, this scene both imposes and withholds from us the positions of victim and victimizer. I want to argue for a positive, active audience engagement with spectacle, but this scene reminds us thematically of sticky problems of agency while reinforcing those problems with its camera work. We may be able to try on different subject-positions, and we have some freedom in the viewing choices we make, but in many ways we are controlled by the camera. In fact, this can especially be the case when we are dealing with spectacle because outside the narrative we are less apt to think in terms of choices—we become victims or victimizers

according to our affective relationship to the spectacle. And often we enjoy it. In other words, despite the opportunities it offers for complex spectatorial engagement, spectacle may be seen as both covering up our relative lack of agency and allowing us to take pleasure in our submission.

Returning to the dance scene, we might observe that the women tend to both lead and to be the focus of both parts of the dance—Elina invents and leads the dance for the trio, while Kate leads Bill in a circling dance which reflects her position as the one who will decide whether they sleep together. This appears to be the kind of strength and self-determination which Elina praises in Madonna. However, in both cases the women seem to represent “leading women” rather than individualized characters. Elina initiates the dance, but her execution is smooth compared to the flailing attempts of both Dennis and Martin, making her into more of a seductive object than a seducing subject. Similarly, while Kate initiates the circling, Bill halts it by caressing her back with his finger—he exercises the decisive gesture. So are these women in control of their own sexuality and exploitation? If not, do we as spectators exploit them or are we victimized by this perhaps subtly sexist portrayal of feminine initiative? I don’t have an answer and clearly no single answer can suffice. Yet, I believe there is some benefit in recognizing the power of pleasure in all three of the manifestations which I discuss in this paper: pleasures can be both liberating and damning. Perhaps that is a necessary risk if we are to get beyond individualistic Self-Other interpretations of desire and narrative in order to imagine more communal dynamics, in this case those of a competent, engaged audience.

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